



Vol. 13, No. 1

CLRI Feb 2026

Page 73-89

Towards Poetics of Home in Anglophone Naga Fiction

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Abstract: This article explores an emerging shift in the poetics of home within Anglophone Naga fiction, focusing on the transition from a traditional Naga conception of home-in-the-village to an alternative conception that deterritorialises

and substitutes the sacrosanctity of natal village. Through a close reading of two novels by Easterine Kire, this article explores the emerging paradigm shift in the notion of home in contemporary Naga society (fiction) and its hermeneutical viability for exposition of complex themes like conflict, violence, insurgency, trauma, love, etc., in Anglophone Naga fiction.

Keywords: Easterine Kire, naga, home, fiction, hermeneutics.

Introduction and Literary Context

Anglophone Naga fiction (ANF) is barely twenty years old.¹ However, in two decades, it has witnessed a slew of experiments with forms and modes of literary expression to become a visible literary constituency in India's geopolitical and cultural periphery – the Northeast. The dominant themes of literary representation in the first decade of ANF (2003-2013) mainly centred on and around Naga experience during the peak of their separatist movement – from the 1950s to the 1980s. This in turn fed the stereotype of Naga experience as a conflict zone, and limited the scope of hermeneutical reflection of its literature to 'resistance literature' (Tellis 2008). However, with *When The River Sleeps* (2014; hence *WRS*), Easterine Kire forged a new mode of literary expression to explore and represent more adequately the full range of Naga imaginative culture and lifeworlds. Kire's synthesis of Naga mythology and folk tradition within a contemporary framework marks a pivotal shift in the poetics of ANF, inviting multifaceted literary and cultural readings.

Apart from the question of form and mode of representation, a notable feature of *WRS* to Naga literature (fiction particularly) is its exploration of an emerging theme in Naga discourse:

¹ The first Naga novel in English was published in 2003 – Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered*.

home. In fact, home and a Naga sense of belonging are important thematic strands that operate as overarching hermeneutical frameworks for situating the choices and actions of Nagas since the 19th century. This seldom articulated idea can be scaled in relation to the contingencies of history and the innate impulse/desire for existence to obtain both individual and collective meanings. In that sense, it is not a 'new' theme in Naga literature – for instance, Temsula Ao also deployed the notion of home as an interpretative frame for her stories in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2005). However, a marked shift in epistemic enunciation of the idea is noticeable in more recent publications. In *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016; hence *ST*), which was the first work to be published after the success of *WRS*, Kire explores the idea of home further, in a way that is digressive of traditional Naga thought. In this context, this article explores this emerging alternative conception of home in Kire's two novels, *WRS* and *ST*, and asks what this means for Anglophone Naga literature.

A major difficulty in taking a theme like 'home' for analysis in relation to ANF lies in its timeless universality. As an iterative theme that is common to all cultures across various temporalities, it can present as an all-too-familiar aspect of existence. And this in turn may/can produce an affective attitude in which a particular iteration may fail to register as well as the presumed generalities. But it must be stressed at the outset that a *particular* idea or notion of home is intimately linked to the specific processes of place-making in a culture at a given time (Muehlebach 2001). So, its constitution or (re)conceptualisation is determined spatial-temporally and suggestive of the evolving realities of the culture/society. In that sense, the (re)emergence of the theme in Naga literary discourse is symptomatic of a reality that requires new epistemic enunciations. Kire's alternative conception offers a perspective that departs from the rigid monopoly of traditional Naga thought over *what* and *where* home should

be. Conceived as fluid and more ‘mental’ than physical/territorial, it challenges the traditional Naga "home-in-the-village" paradigm.

Case Study 1: When the River Sleeps

The temporal setting of *WRS* is neither contemporaneous nor remote. Thematically, home does not appear to be a ‘major’ concern in the narrative, even though it underpins much of the unarticulated motive for character movement and action. In fact, it is one of the least ‘visible’ themes, requiring a closer scrutiny of the text. Hence, it is unsurprising that literary commentators, both Naga and non-Naga, pass over it when this novel is taken up for study. Some of these readings range from ethnographic fiction to environmental humanities (Wijunamai), and ecocriticism (A. Kamei)² to decoloniality (Baishya and Moral). It has also been very generously labelled as a work that is at the “frontline of contemporary indigenous literature” by Vivek Menezes (2021). Such readings are certainly warranted by the text, as Kire’s characters and the world they inhabit are distinctly Naga, and therefore, its realism perforce can be said to embody Clifford Geertz’s ‘thick description’ with multifocal resonances. However, a close reading of the trajectories of the principal characters in *WRS* reveals the abstracted idea of home as the most important factor in the exercise of agency. Kire does not name this emergent idea of home, but she delineates it through the actions and poignant remarks of her principal characters, Vilie, Ate and Zote. Without it, the characters and the novel suffer from a lack of narrative purpose.

Very early in the novel, Kire introduces a Nepali family of three as possessing a mobile notion of home due to economic reasons (*WRS* 13). They are not ‘rooted’ to a particular

² See also Subhra Roy, “Retracing Deep Ecology in the Reorientation of Naga Identity with Special Reference to the Select Works of Easterine Kire Iralu.”

location, and so their idea of home is where they are at the moment. They are a family that is constantly relocating and with no articulated sense of a 'final' home to where they could return once the economic sojourn in a 'foreign' land is over – in this important sense, they are different from 'migrants' who return, or have the option of returning, to their natal place. And it is precisely this lack of a fixed notion of home that allows the Nepali family to remain detached from a place. They represent the figure of the nomad to interrogate, or even demystify, the presumption of place in the construction of home. To them, as it appears in the novel, 'homelessness' does not really mean a 'lack' or 'absence' as is generally and immediately assumed in Naga culture. Instead, it is simply a mode of living. Nomadism as a mode of living for the Nepali family in *WRS* is not characterised as an inability to reach a final destination or find a permanent home.³ Instead, Kire uses it to make an epistemic contrast with traditional Naga thought about home and belonging.

Vilie

The protagonist of *WRS*, Vilie does not strictly fit the figure of the nomad, even though he relocated to the forest and made it his home (*WRS* 3). In contrast to the Nepali family, the Naga characters Vilie and Zote suffer because of their stoic adherence to a territorial concept of home—one deeply rooted in their village of birth, as is traditional in Naga culture. Against both, Kire portrays Ate, another principal character, as possessing a mobile notion of home, one that resembles the

³ They are also different from other nomadic cultures like the Mongolian people, who move within a fixed territory (Mongolia) and have citizenship and other corresponding political rights. On Mongolian nomadism, see Batchuluun Yembuu, "Mongolian Nomads: Effects of Globalization and Social Change." The Nepali family in Kire's novel can be likened to the seafaring nomadic Bajau in Southeast Asia, who are also described as "sea gypsies" and do not have citizenship of any particular country. For more, see Kyoungho Jeon, "The Life and Culture of the Bajau, Sea Gypsies."

Nepali couple's nomadism. She is a foil to both Vilie and Zote's understanding of home. In fact, Ate's idea of home is the narrative mirror meant to help Vilie resolve his (home) issues. In that sense, Vilie's quest for the heartstone is but an essential part, not the final piece, for resolving the question of home and belonging that unsettled him at the start of the novel.

We know from the text that the forest is not Vilie's natal home. He had relocated there when he was twenty-five. Vilie's choice of the forest as home is an obvious deviation from the norm. For the typical Naga, home in the village is the starting point for activity in the world. The village represents a familiar, sanitised and safe space for dwelling – off-limits for malignant spirits and wild animals. However, in Vilie's case, the forest, associated with ideas of the wild and the unpredictable, is converted into the reference point from which he engages with society and culture. He visits the village and the marketplace only when he needs salt, oil and other edible items not easily found in the forest, and when his job as a Forest Ranger requires it.⁴ It is as if Vilie wants to return to life in its simplest form to avoid the emotional and psychological entanglements of human society. He appears to be more open to the possibility of physical harm (in the forest) than to the social duties and obligations of the village community.

Given that Nagas do not have the concept of a hermit, Vilie's choice of the forest as a home inevitably raises psychological questions about his past and present. Even though the text is not explicit about Vilie's reasons for relocating to the forest, two events are implied as probable causes. When he was eighteen, Mechuseno, the woman he loved, was taken by a forest spirit (*WRS* 4-6). Shortly after, he lost his mother (*WRS*

⁴ As mentioned earlier, Vilie's formal job as a Forest Ranger suggests that the setting of the novel is relatively recent. However, the portraits of the villages suggest a non-Christian era, or before the coming of Christianity to these places. The story also hardly focuses on Vilie's job as a Ranger.

141). Two women he adored, and around whom he seems to have built his notion of purpose and meaning in life, passed on one after another. At the time of the novel's opening in *media res*, these events had become memories from more than twenty years ago.

Vilie's move away from the village—the site of his pain—is both symptomatic and necessary. It is symptomatic of a profound isolation; he lacked the friends and relatives who might have stepped in to offer emotional support through his grief. For a long time, Vilie's life in the village centred entirely around two women: his mother and Mechuseno. While one lived, the presence of the other was enough to anchor him to the community. However, when Mechuseno also departed, the village lost both its pleasure and its purpose. The shared space became a constant ghost, reminding him of what he had lost and what his life could have been. It is as if Vilie viewed the village as a mere stage on which these principal actors were meant to help him fulfill his destiny; without them, the play came undone, and the forest became his new stage-home. Yet, even this retreat was not fully realised, as he is once again pushed to the narrative edge. It is precisely at this threshold that the heartstone acts as a vital catalyst, propelling the plot forward.

The opening paragraph of the novel immediately conveys the idea that Vilie is bothered by something that he is unable to articulate:

Vilie plunged his hand into the river. It was cold – close to freezing – and perfectly still. It was just the way it should be. The river had gone to sleep. Everything was just as the seer had told him. Almost imperceptibly, he slid forward and entered the water and plucked a smooth stone from the bottom of the river. In a similar motion, he pulled his arm out of the water and stood still. But it was too late. He felt through the soles of his feet that a great force had awakened. Before he could reach the shore, the water had swelled above his waist –

the river had come alive! In an instant, the great torrents had tethered his legs in its twisting undercurrents, dragging him down forcibly into its depths. Vilie's struggles were feeble against the force of the rushing water. Unable to reach the surface, his lungs began to burn for air and his mouth filled with water. He tried to shout, even as he felt himself being swallowed further into the darkness. Above his struggling form the river roared, drowning out his muffled screams. Then, in a final panicked outburst, he struck out against the power that was consuming him. His movements grew more frantic. A deep guttural sound escaped his throat. He flung out his hand and it hit the edge of the bed. It then dawned on him that he had been dreaming again (*WRS* 1-2).

The recurring dream of wresting a heartstone from the mythical sleeping river correlates with Vilie's desire to alleviate his present suffering, which a change of home has not fully remedied. Like all Angamis, the tribe to which he belongs, Vilie shares the belief that the heartstone is capable of a range of powers: "If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt" (*WRS* 3). However, Kire, emphasises the immaterial aspect of the stone, its capacity to give wisdom to the honest seeker in difficult situations:

The wisdom of the stone is more spiritual than physical. It helps us discover the spiritual identity that is within us, so we can use it to combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us. But men who are not initiated don't understand this about the stone, and they try to use it to gain wealth and other material things (*WRS* 228).

Kire also presents the stone as a neutral object whose real value depends on how and to what end its possessor uses it. This quality of the stone returns agency to the possessor, making the characters the site of moral and ethical actions.

The culmination of Vilie's 'spiritual' transformation comes via the 'chance' encounter with the two sisters, Zote and Ate. In one of the stops on his return from the sleeping river, Vilie runs into the village of Kirhupfümia, where the sisters, Ate and Zote, dwell. Vilie is initially unaware that he has arrived at the village of the 'witches', an all-women village whose inhabitants were forced to live in isolation by their village of birth.⁵ Because of their gifts in matters of the spirit, the sisters immediately perceive that Vilie has a heartstone. While Ate does not covet the stone, Zote actively seeks it for herself to carry out an act of revenge that Kire underlines in the novel.

Within the scheme of the novel, Vilie's encounter with the sisters is the culminating point of the narrative. Kire achieves two things by causing the protagonist to inhabit the same narrative space as two other principal characters: first, she demonstrates the working of the stone and its range of powers, as Vilie and Zote employ it differently; second, the question of home is more directly addressed through their motives and actions. All three characters are estranged from their natal village and have different notions of home. However, the circumstances of their estrangement are not similar: Vilie chose to relocate to the forest of his own accord, but the two sisters were ostracised by their natal village because they were considered to be witches. The stage is set for the two sisters to illustrate different notions of home through their motives and actions. Structurally, Kire uses this encounter to cause Vilie to grow and occupy a position of enlightened strength. So, if the wresting of the stone from the sleeping river is the apogee of the narrative, then this encounter with the two sisters is the start of the resolution. Following this transformation, Vilie acts with newfound precision and decisiveness.

⁵ 'Kirhupfümia' is the Angami term for certain women believed to be born with poisonous powers.

Zote

Zote represents a territorial understanding of home, where primacy is accorded to the physical space of one's natal village. Zote's relentless hatred for her natal village is fundamentally grounded in this psychosocial logic of Naga lifeworld. Even though the text mentions that the village had mistreated Zote, it nonetheless portrays her as resentful, evil and craving revenge (WRS 135-36). The text also gives the impression that Zote's reaction, or desire for revenge, is due to the surrender to the darker forces in the human heart. However, a closer examination of Zote's revenge motive reveals another factor, displacing, or rivalling at least, righteous indignation, or pure evil, as the fundamental driving force. In fact, this factor is not even obvious to Zote herself, or to Ate and Vilie. The surface manifestations of bitterness, rage and desire for revenge disguise deeper psychological and cognitive issues, which I would argue, are the main reasons of her destabilised action.

Zote's actions result from emotional instability caused principally by an inadequacy of cognition. She takes her ostracism from the village *personally* and refuses to move on. Zote is fully aware that the practice of expelling a known *kirhupfü* (witch) from the village is common among the Angami Nagas. She was not the first *kirhupfü* to be expelled in this manner, nor would she be the last. Therefore, her intense adverse reaction cannot be solely attributed to moral indignation stemming from injustice. Underneath the seemingly righteous indignation is Zote's inability to imagine home differently from the traditional, territorial model. Consequently, she is unable to move on and instead takes the folk belief personally as *her* fight. In that sense, Zote's struggle is directed not merely against her natal village, but rather against a foundational custom within the Angami traditional belief system—a conflict underscored by her death at the hands of the ancestor-spirits. Their appearance to defend the village from Zote's madness signifies the restoration of a

disrupted status quo, ensuring that any known *kirhupfũ* will continue to be expelled from the community.

Zote's premature end is not so much about the triumph of tradition as Kire's subtle emphasis on the willingness to accept new realities and adjust the structures of meaning-making. Was a 'normal' life possible for Zote in a new village? The change in Ate's fortune is Kire's answer to the question. Should we then avoid confronting oppressive traditional practices? The text does not advocate an answer in the affirmative nor castigate folk beliefs in general. However, it would seem fair to say that adopting Zote's way of confronting oppressive folk beliefs should be avoided. Instead, Kire seems to suggest a more delicate and circumspect manner of confronting through Ate's happy ending. One might argue that Zote is not the average Naga with a traditional notion of home. But she certainly represents one end of the home spectrum.

Ate

At the other end of the home spectrum is Zote's younger sister, Ate, who has accepted the arbitrary banishment from the village. She confesses to Vilie:

This is my home. I feel home here where there are none to judge me or to spy on me and accuse me of things I am not guilty of. Here, there is no one to say that I caused a bad harvest or that I brought hail and lightning to destroy crops of my neighbours. I don't hanker to go back. I was quite young when I left. I have no pleasant memories of my ancestral village that I should want to go back to it (WRS 142-43).

At age nine, Ate was expelled from the village along with her sister Zote for being born as 'witches'. The passage quoted above indicates that Ate did have a rough childhood in her natal village. And she understandably attributes her lack of desire to return to the absence of "pleasant memories" about

the natal village. In stark contrast to Zote's bitterness and anger, Ate's 'open' attitude allows her to find relative contentment in her new surroundings: "With time...she had embraced her new life in the village of the Kirhupfümia" (*WRS* 168). Ate's hopeful acceptance of her new situation and the experience of relative happiness in limited circumstances combine to produce an unintentional effect: destabilise the Naga traditional notion that a home can be found only in a traditional village.⁶ Instead, the affective aspects of home, like the quality of life, for instance, are given more importance in the emerging home discourse in the novel. Consequently, Ate does not mind leaving her natal home as it can never provide her with the dignity and freedom she now enjoys in the outcast village of Kirhupfümia.

In abstract terms, Ate has reconceived and rearranged the basic components of home according to their importance. Unlike Zote, the physical space of the village is not as important to her as the people who make up the community. Zote's attachment to their natal village is stronger than Ate's despite the greater scorn she faced before their ostracism (*WRS* 132). However, to Ate, the quality of experience is fundamental in thinking of home and belonging. The physical house is an important component, for the spirit of home needs the body of the house, so to speak, but Ate represents a model of home that is moveable, a model that is more consistent with a mental concept, and essentially dependent on the effect produced by the place. In other words, Ate's notion of home is premised on the idea that the physical house is dispensable. So, when it became necessary, she has no trouble abandoning her second home in the village of Kirhupfümia as well.

⁶ The inhabitants of Kirhupfümia came from different villages and had no choice in coming to live there. They were ostracised for being 'witches' by their natal villages.

Case Study 2: Son of the Thundercloud

Kire deploys the figure of the nomad again in her award-winning novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (*ST*, 2016), wherein the protagonist, Pele, is driven from his home by a series of tragedies—fire, famine, and the deaths of his family members—into a mythical terrain of Naga folklore. Like *When the River Sleeps* (2014), the plot is premised on the protagonist's forced relocation from his natal village; yet by the end of *ST*, Pele continues to wander beyond the borders of the mythical world he had "magically" strayed into. Nonetheless, between his initial flight in the Prologue and the novel's conclusion, Pele's life is anchored by a singular purpose: serving as a father-figure to Rhalietuo, the son of the thundercloud. While Rhalietuo's miraculous conception from a single raindrop breaks a centuries-old drought, the spiritual redemption of the land requires the slaying of the spirit-tiger—a central symbol of terror and evil. Rhalietuo's immaculate conception closely parallels the narrative of Mary in the Gospels; however, unlike Mary, Rhalietuo's mother is a widow who has already lost her husband and sons to the spirit-tiger. Within this framework, Pele functions as a 'Joseph' figure to Rhalietuo, shielding him as he is prepared to fulfill the prophecy of ending the tiger's reign of terror. Though Rhalietuo parallels Christ, his narrative arc diverges following his victory: unlike Christ, for whom the cross and resurrection are central to redemption, Rhalietuo meets a tragic, abrupt end immediately after the spirit-tiger is destroyed. Consequently, Pele's 'meaningful' wanderings open up the question of homelessness in deeply existential terms, evoking Georg Lukács's (1920) concept of 'transcendental homelessness.' Given the pre-subjective, anchoring role of the natal village in traditional Naga thought, maintaining a purposeful existence while remaining perpetually unhomed introduces a profoundly subversive dimension to Kire's work.

Pele also shares structural commonalities with Vilie, the protagonist of *WRS*. Central to the resolution of tension in their respective narratives, both protagonists encounter individuals, incidents, or symbols that prepare them for the unseen tasks ahead. For instance, in *ST* (Chapters 3–5), the two elderly sisters, Siedze and Kethonuo, help Pele cultivate the optimism necessary to live a better version of his life. This functions similarly to the motif of the heartstone in Vilie's journey toward enlightenment and self-discovery. Where the two protagonists differ, however, is in their ultimate clarity: Vilie, aided by the power of the stone and Ate's wisdom, can articulate the reasons for his final relocation to the forest; whereas Pele, deeply shattered by the loss of his adoptive relatives, Rhalietuo and Mesanuo, slips back into another cycle of wandering (*ST* 149). In that sense, although Pele fulfills his "Joseph" role for Rhalietuo and successfully helps lift the curse of drought from the land, the question of home remains unresolved in *ST*. Alternatively, one could argue that Pele's notion of home is closer to Ate's in *WRS*, meaning it may not be an issue that requires a neat resolution. Indeed, like Ate, the quality of experience within a village appears to be Pele's primary criterion when deciding where to settle throughout the novella. Yet, unlike Ate, he never explicitly articulates this philosophy, leaving the exact conditions necessary for his idea of home beautifully ambiguous.

Conclusion: A New Teleology

Generally, for a Naga, identity is tied explicitly to the village of birth and the tribe. These larger categories of selfhood tend to subsume individual subjectivities, heavily dictating one's perception of both home and the wider world. Ate's capacity to feel at home wherever she is accepted breaks sharply from this traditional framework, where the village space is held as sacrosanct. This communal sacrosanctity—a motif also prominently observed in Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called*

Home—is no longer as trenchant in the twenty-first-century Naga cultural imagination. Instead, Ate demonstrates a novel attitude towards ancestral spaces: “If I am going to start a new life, why should I take so much of the old with me? It would only hinder me from beginning my new existence” (WRS 170). She is acutely aware of the complications of looking back, symbolised by the material items she intentionally leaves behind, and the psychological will required to make a genuine beginning possible. Her arc underscores a conception of life as a journey passing through fluid points in time; at each stop, one is met with a choice not to remain trapped in the past like Zote—a theme Kire similarly explores in *Bitter Wormwood*. Ultimately, Ate’s perspective illuminates the transformative possibilities engendered by the shifting material and cultural realities confronting contemporary Naga society.

Similarly, while the forest is retained as the locus of Vilie’s dwelling at the novel’s resolution, he can now clearly articulate the reasons behind his unusual choice to forgo village life: “I will not come back to live here. I am too used to the freedom that my forest life offers” (WRS 224). This articulation represents a paradigmatic shift from his mindset at the novel’s commencement. His initial relocation to the forest was an act of flight from an unhappy situation rather than the conscious, self-determined decision of an adult. Conversely, his renewed choice of the forest as home is rooted in a distinct teleology of belonging, one in which personal autonomy is both indispensable and the principal determinant. In other words, Vilie’s choice to remain in the forest—despite his newfound parental duties toward Ate and the orphaned Nepali infant in the village—is not an escape from responsibility. Instead, it exemplifies the confidence of a self-actualised individual who can meaningfully balance personal freedom with domestic obligations. In prioritising liberty within this revised framework of belonging, Kire draws attention to a dimension of selfhood often overlooked in traditional Naga discourses. If home is where the heart is, Kire suggests the heart must reside

where freedom is most fully realised; consequently, the physical house and the natal village, though structurally significant, are no longer the absolute defining attributes of home.

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