

FOSTERING A QUEST HERO IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS*

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Abstract:

*A quest is a metaphorical or a literal journey undertaken by a person or a group of people in pursuit of something. It is defined by Oxford Dictionary as “a long or arduous search for something.” Quests have been the subject of literature throughout ages. It gained popularity in the romances of the Middle Ages, especially through the stories encircling Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table, to name a few. Quest stories have been an integral part of the folklores of many cultures as reflected in the works of the Nigerian writer, Amos Tutola, who integrated the elements and tales of Yoruba folklore in his fiction. His most famous work, *The Palm Wine Drinkard* is a quest story, where the protagonist has fantastic adventures in search of his dead tapster. Quests may also result in a failure but the importance is placed on the experiences and self-knowledge which shapes the quester/s. The present research paper attempts to study fostering a quest hero in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*.*

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The search in a quest literature can range from the hunt for the famous Holy Grail or the city of gold, Eldorado to a search for spirituality or a utopian world, Shangri La. It can be anything which motivates the protagonist for undertaking a quest. In Easterine Kire's novel, Vilie is on a journey to find a heartstone as it is said to have a power to transform a person's life, the power to deliver what a person seeks and it is imperative to have belief in its power.

The novel, *When the River Sleeps* is set in the present Nagaland and Kire has established Vilie as a convenient quest hero in accordance with the close-knit community life of the tribes of this region, where the responsibility of a family further extends as a responsibility towards a community. Vilie is a person without a wife and children, living away as the protector of the *gwi* (Indian bison) in a forest with no immediate and recurring responsibilities of a community based society. He is a hunter, who lives alone in a forest yet he comes from a community of people, where the “...idea of a man living out in the forest-away from the communal life of the village-was so alien to them.” (07) The shaping of the quester has been already reinforced by the writer in situating him as different from the rest of his people. He is projected as a common man, adept in hard life of forest destined to be in unconventional situations through the call of his repetitive dream, the dream of plucking a heartstone from the Sleeping River.

Though he is portrayed as a non-conformist in regard to the societal institution of living and lives away from the communal life, Kire tactfully weaves in the effect of the belief system and ways of the community life on Vilie. He doesn't kill a weretiger, who attacks him in a shed at night as he knows that if he kills it, “...he would be obligated to perform the tiger-killerritual which was complicated and not meant for a solitary hunter to fulfil alone in a forest.” (25) Further, when he is offered brew by an old woman in the nettle forest, he accepts it as he doesn't want to appear impolite. In their culture, rice brew is considered as food and is offered to guests, so is the case with the other tribes of the Northeast India, a gesture disrupted with conversion to Christianity in certain parts of the region. In this regard, we can see the importance and influence of the respective community's beliefs, customs and manners communicating through Vilie, who has distanced himself physically from his community but not from the inherent values, knowledge and beliefs.

One of the most integral parts of the text is the instillation of the traditional knowledge of herbal medicine. Kire has deliberately infused the different traditional plants, herbs, leaves, ingredients, etc. to sustain the quest hero's physical health throughout in this text. For instance, Idele offers bitter wormwood leaves and rock bee honey for Vilie's wound, there is a mention of the use of ciená for open wounds and crofton weed for wounds that are bigger, Vilie uses fireweed to stop bleeding and remembers the drink of ginseng and the seeds of nutgall tree as effective to fight fever. Vilie is furnished by Kire with an awareness of the medicinal value of certain plants on his journey but his understanding is further enriched by people who share their knowledge of different types of medicine found in the forest.

Vilie understands the nature of the quest and knows that the heartstone is protected by spirits and if he is successful on his quest, then there lies a danger of attracting harm from both humans and spirits who wish to possess it. He knows that he needs to equip himself both to overcome challenges from living beings as well as supernatural beings. He prepares himself to face the struggles related to both the physical and the spiritual. He has his gun but remembers the seer's words, "Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder"(31). This he experiences when he first encounters the weretiger and shoots at him. Later, when the weretiger appears Vilie asserts himself as its clansman and the tiger departs when he "...challenged his lack of courtesy"(28). Another encounter happens in the forest of Rahuria, which is considered as an unclean forest as those who pass through this forest contract fever. Vilie falls ill while sheltering himself in this forest but more significantly, it illustrates the fight of the spirits, where the body is helpless. Vilie saw a dark shape sitting on top of him, which rendered him motionless and helpless. Finally, though weak and sick, he succeeds in defeating that spirit by asserting his spirit over it, remembering the seer's advice, "They are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirits that asserts itself" (83).

On his journey, Vilie goes through series of unfortunate events. One of them is joining a hunting group for a night and being framed for the murder of one of the hunters. Vilie runs for his life but is well aware of the feud which might develop between his and the dead hunter's village because of the murder. Therefore, he responsibly surrenders himself for a trial, comes clean of the charge and resumes his journey. This incident highlights the virtue of selflessness as the quest hero disrupts his quest in order to avoid enmity between two villages.

The journey of a hunter to emerging as a hero worthy of undertaking a quest for the heartstone develops and tries to convince the reader with the progression of the story infused with trials, struggles and the character's awareness of his growing strength and perseverance through each experience. In his final act of securing the heartstone, Vilie's exercised patience and evolved strength of spirit plays a vital role. He and his companion, Kani waits silently and patiently for the rushing river to go to sleep and that was the time when the custodians, the spirits called widow-women disappeared from the river. He jumped into the river as the river stopped moving and plucked the stone but his struggle was not over. He struggled to come out of the river and after helpless attempts, concentrated on the spirit words, "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! Kepenuopfu fights for me, today is my day! I claim the wealth of the river because mine is a greater spirit. To him who has the greater spirit belongs the stone" (103). The struggle continued and he finally, emerged unharmed with the heartstone. The widow-women descended with thin spears and curses, Vilie and Kani ran without looking back. Kani uttered the name of Kepenuopfu (creator deity) and urged the spirits to retreat.

Vilie's return journey puts emphasis on possession of a power and the responsibility which comes along with power. Safeguarding the heartstone becomes a bigger task than possessing it as it cannot fall into wrong hands as happens when he visits the village of Kirhupfumia, a village where outcast women with poisonous powers live. Vilie is hosted by Ate in this village and while his stay, her elder sister, Zote steals the heartstone to avenge her former village for driving the two sisters out of the village. Zote's plan succeeds but the angry spirits of the ancestors kills Zote. Vilie gets the heartstone back but this incident of

loss of lives alerts him regarding the evil execution with the help of its power.

It suggests that once power is in a person's hand, no stagnancy is entertained as the whole process of acquiring power turns absurd. The working of power is clear and it is important to dwell on at whose disposal it is because the same heartstone which Vilie was used to save Ate's life from the wounds inflicted by a weretiger, was used by Zote to kill and harm the villagers. Both the attempts were successful but their ends differed.

Kire has presented Vilie as a quest hero in the process, not with any demi-god skill or possessing a trickster quality or a magical weapon as often happens in the quest journeys in folklores. He is a hunter, who has succeeded in his quest through the strength of his virtues, mind and most importantly, spirit. Vilie of course, is provided with help to secure the heartstone on his journey, forth and back.

Self-sufficiency is not adequate to fight distortions on such an extraordinary task. He receives help from his surroundings. The forest provides him food, shelter, medicine, etc. Similarly, most of the people he meets provide him with valuable words of advice, protection, traditional knowledge, food and shelter. Kane, for instance, puts his life in danger by accompanying him to the Sleeping River, the old man whom Vilie meets on his return journey on a market day warns him about the spirits who might snatch his heartstone and Ate protects him from Zote. Therefore, it suggests that personal interest should not be the motive of the person who possesses the heartstone. Vilie sets out alone on a quest but he not alone on his journey. Quest involves people and its success should also engage people, be of a greater help than limited to an individual.

Kire serves an extended motive, surpassing the journey of a quest hero and the hero. This novel is filled with less of fantastic incidents and more of the bearings of an existing belief system of a tribe. This includes the various facets of the traditional belief system the importance of a community in an individual's life, the role of an individual born in a community, rituals, values, the responsibility of power, the belief in the symbiotic co-existence with the spirits and the traditional knowledge of medicine. Kire has communicated the importance of the fading tradition, values and culture of most of the tribes of Northeast India by fostering Vilie as a quest hero.

Works Cited

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