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Decolonial Oral Storytelling and Gendered Memory in Northeast Indian Literature

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Abstract: The present study undertakes the analysis of storytelling as a gendered and decolonial practice through *Laburnum for My Head* by Temsula Ao and *When the River Sleeps* by Easterine Kire. It foregrounds the texts within the context of Indigenous Naga cultures and ecologies. It studies storytelling as an ethical practice of witnessing, memory, and resistance, inflected by the history of conflict, displacement, and colonialism. Through the stories in *Laburnum for My Head*, the study shows how women's voices embody a powerful site of trauma, resistance, and ethics within a militarized landscape. Through *When the River Sleeps*, the study shows how storytelling around oral cultures, mythic consciousness and ecological relationships embody the spirit of Indigenous knowledge through the character of Vilie. Through these, using the theories of Indigenous feminism, ecofeminism, and decolonialism, the study foregrounds the narratives as a means of imagining identity and decolonization in Northeast India.

IndexTerms **- Storytelling, Indigenous Literature, Gender, Decolonization, Northeast India, Cultural Memory, Ecocriticism**

INTRODUCTION

Literature in Northeast India is a response to a history of marginalization, political oppression, and colonialism, seeking to address the suppressed and fragmented history of the Northeast. Indigenous people have always found solace in oral traditions, myths, legends, and personal narratives, which are a significant part of Indigenous people's history. Walter Benjamin, in his essay describes the importance of storytelling in terms of shared experiences, wherein he argues, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience his own or that reported by others, and he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 84). By focusing on the experiences of living in a history of loss, displacement, and survival, these forms of storytelling are a direct challenge to the linear history of the state. Recent research has argued that these forms of storytelling are a means of maintaining alternative epistemologies of the Northeast, in terms of land, ecology, and people (Iqbal & Borah, 2025; Mero & Devi, 2024).

Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire explicitly invoke the tradition of Indigenous storytelling in the broader discourse. Ao explores trauma, memory, and moral complexity through fragmented short stories that resemble oral storytelling, while Kire draws upon mythic storytelling as a means of emphasizing ecological ethics. In the tradition of Indigenous literature, storytelling and historical consciousness are intertwined as they form lived epistemologies that incorporate ethical, ecological, and civic knowledge. Folklore, ritual, and mythic storytelling are based upon the principles of repetition and difference, rather than resolution. This reflects the ways in which Indigenous people remember violence and trauma. In addition, storytelling has been found to be a gendered practice. Women are figured as the guardians of memory through processes of mourning, storytelling, and quotidian remembrance, with the role of labor often being overlooked in the dominant discourse. In the tradition of Indigenous eco-feminist scholarship, the role of women's storytelling has been found to be the mediator between land, body, and community, emphasizing the ways in which storytelling can be both care and resistance (Agrawal, 2025). In Ao's work, fragmented narrative is used as a means of representing traumatic memory without resolution, while in Kire's work, mythic narrative is used as a means of enacting ritual tests based on the land and non-human actors. These works, collectively, use narrative as a means of decolonial practice, one that celebrates Indigenous cosmologies and relational knowledge (Bhattacharyya, 2024).

The term 'decolonial storytelling' is used to define the narrative practices which challenge the colonial history by focusing on the Indigenous ethical responsibilities. The concept of 'Indigenous posthumanism' expands this by positioning land, animals, and spirits as active moral agents, subverting human-centered worldviews. Oral epistemologies foreground knowledge passed through lived, shared experience rather than solely through written archives. Through these theories, the works of Ao and Kire are seen as the living Indigenous ways of knowing and resisting. The research on the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire has seen an increase in the last ten years, with the critics using the theories of ecocriticism, Indigenous studies, trauma theories, and gender theories. The most dominant theories on the works of the writers are the use of storytelling as the lifeline of Indigenous culture, particularly in the areas where oral traditions have ensured the survival of ethical and social knowledge. The research on the works of Easterine Kire has focused on the use of myth, folklore, and oral epistemological practices in opposition to the Western form of storytelling. Gogoi (2017) interprets that *When the River Sleeps* can be read as a self-conscious hybridity of myth and reality, wherein the indigenous cosmology serves as the logic for the narrative, rather than the symbol. According to Iqbal and Borah (2025), the literary endeavor of Kire revolves around the idea of cultural conservation through the translation of oral knowledge systems into text, the primacy of storytelling as an epistemic practice.

Ecocritical analysis of Kire's work revolves around the idea that land, river, and forest are the agents of the narrative. Bhattacharyya (2024) has interpreted *When the River Sleeps* from the point of view of posthumanism, wherein the text can be read as subversive, disrupting anthropocentric hierarchy by offering ethical agency to nonhuman entities. Shohe and Banerjee (2025) build upon this to contextualize Kire's story in terms of Indigenous posthumanism, in which human–more-than-human relationships are guided by kinship and reciprocal relations rather than authority. The ecological concerns are contextualized within the broader discourse of Indigenous survival, which argues that the negotiation of nature and culture in the fiction of Kire can not only be seen as an act of resistance but also an act of resisting colonial epistemologies. The critical reception of Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* has mainly focused on trauma, memory, and the psycho-social impact of conflict. Raam Kumar and Padmanabhan (2020) have examined the work as a literary form that reflects the trauma of conflict and the ways in which silence, fragmentation, and emotional repression are central to the narrative structures of Ao. The work has also been examined by Gogoi (2012) through the lens of ecofeminism, which positions women, the environment, and suffering in a relationship with one another, suggesting an understanding of the gendered ecology of survival through the fiction of Ao. Moreover, Ayeh (2024) has examined the fiction of Ao through the lenses of psychoanalysis and folklore.

While the previous research has provided valuable insights into the thematic issues present in the works of Temsula Ao and Easterine Kire, the majority of the research on these authors' works appears to be conducted independently of each other, each beginning from a different perspective. Most studies of Temsula Ao tend to focus on the issues of trauma, conflict, and the psychological impact of these elements, treating individual stories as independent units rather than a part of the whole. Similarly, the work of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* appears to be on the issues of myth, ecology, and posthumanism, failing to explore the gendered aspects of storytelling and the ethics present within the narrative. However, the more important fact to be considered here is the scarcity of comparative research conducted on both the authors. For instance, the intersection of gender, ecology, and storytelling as a means of decolonial resistance within the context of the indigenous worldview appears to be a largely unexplored area of research.

NEED OF THE STUDY

The present research aims to investigate the storytelling genre as a form of cultural memory and ethical knowledge, particularly in the context of Indigenous culture. It also aims to analyze the labor of remembering and witnessing, specifically with regard to the gendered aspect of storytelling, as well as the ecological, more-than-human relationships that feature prominently in the storytelling genre. In addition, the study aims to analyze the storytelling genre as a form of resistance against the colonial form of historical and epistemic violence. It also aims to evaluate the ways in which Indigenous storytelling subverts the dominant form of literary conventions and epistemic systems. It contributes to the growing body of Northeast Indian literary criticism, as it extends the decolonial feminist analysis of the storytelling genre, particularly with regard to the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao.

This research focuses more on the analysis of selected texts to understand the role of storytelling in literature. It does not aim to cover all the thematic aspects of Indigenous storytelling traditions in Northeast India. It is an analysis of the two texts from a particular perspective while recognizing the scope for further research on Indigenous oral storytelling traditions and other Indigenous contexts and writers to add to the rich narrative diversity of the Naga and Northeast Indian region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows a qualitative, interpretative methodology, focusing on the close reading of the two texts. It considers the narrative structure, characterization, the silences within the narrative, symbolism, and ecological elements to comprehend the significance of the stories. Through the lens of ecocriticism and ecofeminism, which center on the Indigenous perspective, the study undertakes to comprehend the significance of storytelling to the relationships between gender, land, and memory. It follows a comparative methodology to comprehend the similarities and differences between the strategies followed in the short stories and the mythic fiction to comprehend the decolonial resistance within the genre. It draws upon secondary sources to contextualize the study, ensuring a focus on the texts as spaces of Indigenous knowledge.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Foundations of Gendered and Decolonial Indigenous Storytelling

Narrative form in Indigenous storytelling is not an ornamentation but a way of knowing that is born out of lived experience, ethical responsibility and survival. As Mero and Devi (2024) contend, these stories serve as a repository of ecological wisdom and history in the form of repetition, silence, and even affect, rather than a linear chronology. This is especially true of Northeast Indian literature, where the written word remains shaped by oral epistemologies. In *Laburnum for My Head*, narrative often becomes testimony rather than a plot-driven narration. Stories like "The Letter" and "Flight" play through memory, uncertainty, emotional restraint, emphasizing memory as delicate, but essential agency. The narrators do not have narrative powers in the traditional sense. Instead, knowledge is generated through partial remembrance and shared silence. In a similar manner, in *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire organizes the writing of the novel around a journey in the service of ancestral belief, myth, and experiential knowledge, rather than of reasoned cause and effect. Vilie's knowledge of the forest, the river and the spirits is not developed by learning or instruction but by being vigilant and moral. Indigenous storytelling values experiential knowing, with moral action leading the way to explanation. Kire's narrative therefore embodies storytelling as epistemology, building knowledge into action, ritual, restraint, even, rather than through exposition. Building on Smith (2012), placing emphasis on Indigenous storytelling as

epistemically salient challenges the colonial scientific paradigms of knowledge that regarded oral and communal knowledge as less valuable than written archival documentation.

Gendered experience is vital to how stories about violence, loss and survival are told within Indigenous communities. Sikhamoni Gogoi (2012) insists that Indigenous ecofeminism can only be understood through culturally situated forms of relations between women, land and memory rather than through universal feminist perspectives. Informed by Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist perspective, the interweaving of women's ecological knowledge with colonial resistance to extractive forces illustrates how gendered storytelling serves to represent embodied care of the environment and critique of colonialism (Shiva, 1989). In narratives of Northeast Indian literature, women are often placed at the periphery of events. "The Three Women," "Laburnum for My Head," and other stories show women's attempts to negotiate grief and ritual even as silence takes hold in the wake of conflict. Forgiveness and remembering in burial rituals, collective discussions, and unspoken endurance operates on a gendered level. According to Raam Kumar and Padmanabhan (2020), such kinds of narratives rarely express trauma through spectacle, instead communicating it through narrative restraint, pauses, and unresolved endings. Ao's stories embody this form of narrative care that suffering is recognized but never aestheticized. Even whilst *When the River Sleeps* focuses on a male protagonist, gendered ethics take hold in the story. Women as moral pillars of the community, the moral terrain shaped by guidance, caution, and relational wisdom. Indigenous ecofeminist stories, according to Dipti Agrawal (2025), often act through indirect representation, as a consequence that women exert the power to influence ethical choices through narratives rather than narrative domination. Kire's depiction of community life embodies this principle, positioning gender within a larger land–body–story continuum and refraining from seeing it as just another thematic issue.

Decolonization is an approach both to Indigenous literature and colonialism that argues ecological relationships challenging anthropocentric and colonial perspectives. Pronami Bhattacharyya (2024) suggests Indigenous posthumanist narratives transform nature into an ethical agent rather than an observer to the story. This is evident in both Ao and Kire. In their work, landscapes function as witnesses to history and also participants in moral life. In *Laburnum for My Head*, nature is regularly seen as an unimpacting spectator such as trees, hills, and towns with the mark of violence on the leaves without comment. Stories such as "A Simple Question" and "Sonny" embed personal loss and moral ambiguity within the everyday settings, reaffirming what Shohe and Banerjee (2025) call Indigenous posthumanism based on relationality and communalism. Nature's unwillingness to explain or intervene reflects the story's refusal to accept resolution. In *When the River Sleeps*, both the forest and the river exert more outward agency. The "sleeping" of the river and the moral surveillance of the forest situate non-human culture as an ethical mechanism that adapts to human behaviour. But as Cherian (2025) claims, such narratives also perform decolonial resistance on behalf of Indigenous cosmologies that reject colonial fissures, that of separation between human and non-human life. Here, storytelling becomes a form of resistance as it maintains relational ethics in the face of extractive and instrumental logic. Narratives, gendered memory, ecological relationality, then, are integrated rather than discrete analytic frames.

Storytelling, Gender, and Trauma in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*

The short story format reflects the broken nature of memory in post-conflict societies. Trauma in Ao's fiction is seldom directly articulated (Kumar and Padmanabhan 2020). It surfaces via narrative restraint, fractured memory and moral ambiguity. The stories do not reconstruct history in linear terms but bear witness to its emotional residues. This narrative strategy is especially evident in "The Letter." The story centers on a long delayed arrival of a letter whose contents carry much more than their brevity, laden with emotional weight. Silence shapes the telling of the story, not only in terms of silence between the letter's sender and receiver, but also due to years of waiting. The story resists explanatory excess. It foregrounds absence itself as a narrative force. Memory performs recovery as endurance here, following Nathanael Ayeh (2024), who observes that Naga storytelling often values affective truth more than factual closure.

In similar fashion, "A Simple Question" dramatizes moral inquiry more than its narrative action. The title question in an uncertain world challenging character to reconcile with their ethical responsibility in a world of fear and power struggle. But the story's strength is in its refusal to resolve the question conclusively. Ao protects moral ambiguity so that, in a conflict situation, certainty may itself be ethically dubious. The story, in this context, positions memory as not retrofitted but anticipatory, molded by the effects that echo away within the narrative. Fragmentation, in this sense, turns into a decolonial narrative strategy. It acknowledges that memories molded by sustained violence cannot be set neatly within a narrative structure and expressed for all time in all their variety of forms. The stories suggest that remembering itself is an ongoing moral act rather than a completed narrative task. "Flight" is also a prime example of fragmented storytelling in concentrating on the emotional aftermath instead of the events themselves. The act of flight, whether literal or psychological, becomes a reaction to sustained insecurity. The voice of the writer is measured and careful so that the reader can feel where the writer has been, as life moves slowly, and then not how much of the loss was visible to them, as much as what they were, instead of being attracted by the narrative. Therefore, what these stories collectively demonstrate is how Ao uses fragmentation, not as a literary device, but as a moral stance, in keeping with the broken yet resilient nature of memory in militarized spaces.

Women feature as essential yet unassuming subjects of *Laburnum for My Head*. Their voices often are through witnessing rather than resistance, an observation that supports the gendered labour of memory in Indigenous cultures that Sikhamoni Gogoi (2012) speaks of. Ao's women are not so much dominant in narrative space as the emotional and ethical tether on which narrative pivots. "The Three Women" presents a powerful depiction of shared female endurance. The narrative brings together three women, all of whom are united not by any dramatic incidents, but by a quiet acknowledgement of each other's pain. Trauma, in this narrative, is shared, not singular, thus supporting the norm of women's pain being ordinary and hence invisible. Such narratives emphasize

affective junctions, whereby identity and suffering travel relationally instead of being experienced as an individual, a process Ao's account achieves accurately. The tale "Laburnum for My Head" itself is one of the most touching portrayals of gendered memory within the book. Her wanting a laburnum tree to be placed over her grave changes a mundane image into a picture of ecological continuity and ritualistic care, which the protagonist wants. The tree embodies both remembering and witnessing, relating personal loss to the natural world. The woman's request is silent, almost modest, but not without meaning that remembrance is laid, not to public record of it, but to the land. This act demonstrates what Gogoi (2012) calls Indigenous ecofeminist consciousness, that women's identities are linked and integrated within land and ritual and continuity as opposed to an assertion. In "Sonny," emotional fortitude becomes something else. Loss lingers on, with especially prominent maternal testimony, and the story follows its impact on familial relationships. The mother's grief is dramatized not through explicitness or exposure but extended emotional presence. Her silence tells him no. It tells him depth. Ao makes it up and avoids sentimentalization. Here, mourning lives on as a state of being, rather than as a story path.

Nature in the tale serves as a mnemonic site of memory, one that mirrors and absorbs the human condition. Tales of trees and villages and landscapes return with little fanfare, the evidence of violence and survival, unspoken but audible, written, unheeded. This ecological presence is in line with the observation of Swayamsidha (2024) that Indigenous narrative representations often portray nature as a moral witness rather than a passive space. The tree is not merely a reductionist symbol rather it performs memory work. The land becomes involved in mourning, able to bear witness in places where human institutions have failed. The relational approach in ecology strengthens our ethical relationship to people and place. And in "The Boy Who Sold an Airfield," land comes to be tied up with questions of control, loss, and disruption over time. The act of selling the airfield is a metaphor for broader processes of expropriation and external control. The process of turning land into a commodity exposes the erosion of communal relationships to place, even though the story is not overtly politically aware. Landscapes in Naga narratives are often filled with multiple histories which can be more than their mere telling function. Ao's narrative is an example, with land itself registering the effects of colonial and postcolonial intervention. Throughout the collection, nature does not come between people and a kind of redeemed life but simply observes. Its silence echoes the characters' silences, which re-emphasize the ethical constraint of the collection. This story choice resists romanticization and focuses instead on coexistence defined by endurance.

Altogether, *Laburnum for My Head* weaves a narrative ecology through which fragmented memory, gendered endurance, and ecological witnessing converge. The story refuses closure, placing ethical attentiveness above narrative resolution. In fact, trauma is neither sensationalized nor effaced. It is sustained in silence, in ritual, and in relational memory. Approaching storytelling in the context of care rather than control, Ao reclaims narrative space for historically silenced voices and for women in particular, whose labour of remembering underpins communal life. Repeatedly, Ao permits the unsaid to have emotional and historical heft and the foregrounding of restraint over revelation. By doing so, the collection redefines storytelling as an effort to care for all whose lives the memory is saving from display, while still maintaining its force. In its focus on fractured narratives, silences, or mere everyday expressions of endurance, Ao's fiction, as such, challenges our understanding of fiction to be gender- and ethics-based practices that are situated in memory and loss.

Myth, Ecology, and Ethical Resilience in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

When the River Sleeps brings together myth, ecology, ethics and survival through the lens of Naga cosmology, which lays the emotional and philosophical backbone of the story. Rather than the formal political violence of contemporary realist conflict stories, the novel utilizes mythic landscapes of rivers, forests, and spirits to speak to themes of peril, ethics, and survival. Myth is not merely a distant cultural relic, rather, it functions as a dynamic framework that shapes experience, behaviour, and decision-making. At stake across Vilie's life is not a life of merely surviving one's human and nonhuman pasts, but a life of negotiating a moral dialogue between human and nonhuman. In the novel, myth provides a narratorial ideology that acts to support Indigenous ecological knowledge and gendered ethics. Here the forest and river are moral tests of Vilie as the emphasis is placed on survival as dignity, authority, and interdependency. In doing so, Kire presents a counter-narrative to extractive ways of knowing and presents storytelling as ethically grounded in memory, mythic history, and reciprocal connection to the land. The novel follows the pattern of a mythic quest, although not a linear or heroic set of steps. As shown in the narrative, Vilie's journey through the woods is episodic, not defined by an end point but by a series of encounters. This reinforces the cyclical and relational quality of Indigenous storytelling. In Northeast Indian narratives, myth has found a life-alive epistemology to serve as the vehicle for ethical behaviour rather than simply the means of explaining origins (Gogoi, 2017). Kire's novel demonstrates this way of working by incorporating myth into everyday survival. The river is itself a mythic thing, said to unfold stones of immense might only when it "sleeps." As Kire reminds us again and again, it is only "when the river sleeps" that humans can enter the stream (Kire, 2014, p. 131). This belief structures the rhythm of the narrative, suspending conventional concepts of time and progress. The river's sleeping and waking creates uncertainty, underscoring the idea that nature is impossible to master or predict. Non-linear storytelling mimics Indigenous temporalities that emphasize coexistence rather than control. What follows for Vilie is the story that plays out in this framework, where patience and attention count as much as speed or strength. Spirits can even be encountered, and their presence can further blur the line between the real and the imaginary. These spirits are not wholly benign or malicious but the product of human action. Myth here becomes an ethical language through which the forest tells readers what is expected. Vilie's survival does not require that these forces be transcended, but that he acknowledges and reacts within humility. Within this framework, Kire presents myth a living system, not static knowledge but evolving ethical practice.

Even though Vilie is male, the narrative has a very gender-fraught hero. It engages with values of care, restraint and relational accountability in terms of gendered ethics. Maternal imagery in terms of the earth and forest is frequently invoked in the novel, and motherhood is a potent symbol of nurturing care and a strict ethical code. Dipti Agrawal notes that in Indigenous ecologies, the

land is feminized, not as a way of sentimentalizing it, but to highlight the ethic of mutual accountability, not ownership (2025). Kire's forest is this ethic played out in action, providing sustenance while forcing the issue of respect. Vilie's ethical trials are shaped by encounters with female-coded forces and entities such as protectors, warning figures, and morally judgmental spirits that guide and test him throughout his journey. These encounters reaffirm that survival depends more upon listening and ethical responsiveness than anything else. Cherian posits that gendered ethics in Indigenous narratives tends to favour emotional intelligence and discipline over physical power (2025). It is the very act of not abusing the forest, or being the one pushing the outcome, that makes Vilie a success. The novel also subverts conventional masculinity by reimagining strength. Vilie's endurance is his capacity to wait, to watch and retreat when called for. Such an ethical stance stands in stark contrast to extractive masculinities linked with conquest and consumption. Instead, in the novel, gender acts as an ethical framework rather than a biological state that links survival to values historically identified as feminine care, patience, and relational consciousness.

In the forest, river, and spirits of *When the River Sleeps*, a more-than-human world is at stake. Here the sense of individual agency is divided between human beings and animals for good and ill. Posthumanist perspectives here are of benefit in that they allow the writer to understand ecology not simply as one passive backdrop, but as a participant who has an active part to play in narrative effect. Indigenous texts often anticipate posthumanist thinking by acknowledging non-human entities as ethical agents, rather than figuration and metaphors (Pronami Bhattacharyya, 2024). Kire's novel showcases this recognition through its depiction of nature as interactive and purposeful. The river's refusal to let them have its stone unless the circumstances are preordained reminds us of this agency. Shohe and Banerjee argue that such narratives destabilize anthropocentrism, representing survival as joint rather than competitive (2025). Vilie's journey succeeds because he joins the rhythms and limits given to the more-than-human world. Crucially, Kire does not romanticize nature. The forest is a dangerous and unpredictable place with the potential for harm. But this danger is not random. It portrays an imbalance in ethics rather than aggression.

The novel therefore portrays ecology as a moral system that reacts to human actions by focusing on the views of the Indigenous people regarding the land as a living, interconnected relationship, rather than something that can be exploited. By privileging Vilie's quest against a landscape imbued with myth, Kire foregrounds survival as a moral practice that depends on a kind of respect towards the more-than-human world. Myths are a living framework that guides ethical actions, and the ecological approach has been supported by the gendered ideas of care and control. The dominant literary conventions that differentiate myth from reality and ecology from culture are challenged by the ecological approach, which presents a holistic worldview wherein storytelling makes ethical living possible, land is where human actions are located, and survival depends on our relational responsibility, rather than our ability to conquer.

Narrative as Decolonial Practice: Comparative Insights from Ao and Kire

When approached through storytelling as a decolonial practice with differing narrative forms, *Laburnum for My Head* and *When the River Sleeps* can find, engage in, and have constructive dialogue with one another. The focus is on their relationship through difference. Each text, while responding to the historical violence, environmental degradation, and cultural decline, does so in its own particular way, with the guidance of indigenous ways of knowing, which influences the narrative styles. What most distinguishes Ao from Kire is the storytelling form. The fragmented nature of Ao's short stories resists linear order, as do her fragmented narratives, which reflect the splintered historical memory in militarized Naga society. The stories "The Letter," "A Simple Question," and "Flight," do not proceed to closure. They are left frozen in silence and in doubt or moral unease. The trauma Ao collects is not told in a grand narrative form. It exists in the everyday, its presence communicated in pauses, omissions, and unremarkable conversations. By contrast, *When the River Sleeps* follows a mythic quest, its narrative trace closely paralleling Vilie's journey through the forest, village and moral test. Although this narrative seems more unbroken, it does not mirror colonial continuity. Instead it employs a cyclical logic shaped by Indigenous cosmology with the human forces and non-human forces alike slowly coming to an even greater understanding on an even more gradual basis. The path does not end with conquest or dominance, but it requires discipline, humility, and vigilance. In this way, Kire's sense of narrative continuity does not challenge Ao's fragmentation. Both are challenges to colonial time by giving experiential knowledge priority over linear progress within the colonial period.

Ao and Kire function differently when it comes to trauma, but they both work against its spectacularization. Trauma emerges obliquely in *Laburnum for My Head*. In "The Boy Who Sold an Airfield," violence registers not through graphic description but via the moral corruption of ordinary life under protracted war. In the same manner, "The Three Women" foregrounds collective endurance over individual suffering, focusing on how gendered lives both receive and carry the impact of political turmoil. Rather, silence in Ao's stories is not absence but a strategy of narrative recognition of what cannot be fully articulated in dominant discursive frames. Kire's handling of suffering, more unevenly splintered, is similarly circumspect. *When the River Sleeps* does not frame trauma in spectacle but locates ethical responsibility in an event of loss, depletion, and spiritual imbalance in the world around. Vilie's encounters focus not on physical power but on moral discernment, raising questions such as whether one should take only what is needed, the importance of listening, and the recognition of the agency of the forest and river. This ethical concern resonates with Indigenous storytelling forms in which fiction is used to live a story and not write it down as a tale of conquest (Barman, 2025).

Gender operates differently in the two works but is pivotal to the narrative ethics here. Ao's collection makes women witnesses and emotional focal points. In tales like "Laburnum for My Head" and "The Three Women," women are not merely victims of violence but bearers of memory, ritual, and continuity. Their resilience is not spoken of, not acknowledged, yet it is crucial to the survival of a group. Narrative is a form of gendered labor, a way of holding together what violence seeks to break apart. On the

other hand, *When the River Sleeps*, is about a male protagonist, but the ethics of the gendered exist just below the surface. The forest and the maternal imagery give it multiple iterations, and ethical failure tends to be associated with forms of masculine excess such as greed, domination or disregard for limits. While women may not serve as a narrative central focus, the values that resonate with Vilie's journey are in close alliance with the care-based ethics that are traditionally associated with Indigenous women's knowing, knowledge and knowledge systems. This divergence highlights the difference that decolonial storytelling does not have to use the same representational strategies to express gendered accountability.

The function of nature is yet another of the major points of difference. Land and landscape frequently serve as silent witnesses in Ao's stories. The hills, trees, and villages take in violence without comment, as mnemonics and as what human characters are often unable to articulate. Kire goes further, giving nature direct agency. The forest, river, and spirits do more than just notice. They assess, react and intervene. The "sleep" of the river is not one of passivity but of conditional generosity, and it is conditional only to those who come to it with ethical restraint. This shift of perspective, from witness to agent, is characteristic of a kincentric worldview, in which human survival is predicated on a relationship of reciprocity with the more-than-human world (Barman, 2025).

Ao and Kire collectively demonstrate that decolonial storytelling in Northeast Indian literature is not monosemic. Fragmentation and continuity, silence and myth, witnessing and testing are not opposing but complementary. Both texts resist colonial epistemologies by denying the dominant position regarding history, over land, and over narrative meaning. Rather they suggest storytelling as a relational practice that is concerned with care, restraint and responsibility. This comparative engagement shows storytelling to be more than representations but an ethical activities of survival, an act that preserves memory, while recognizing how narrative has limits of its own. By examining in this manner, this perspective paves the way for a larger reflection on the implicit nature of Indigenous narratives.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how storytelling works as a gendered and decolonial practice in Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* and Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. A comparative reading of these texts moves beyond thematic categorization. What is revealed through this inquiry is not a particular model of resistance but a constellation of narrative practices in which memory, survival, and responsibility are carried forward.

Across *Laburnum for My Head*, storytelling plays out in disjointed and usually muted formats. The fragmented nature is reminiscent of the fragmented reality of a region born out of militarization and conflict. The silence, hesitation, and the moral complexity of these stories are not failures of the narrative but rather an acknowledgment of the limitations of narration and storytelling. Using women's voices, unnamed figures, and ordinary encounters, Ao turns storytelling into witnessing, as if it were something that keeps the memory alive without taking control of the trauma. Here gender is inseparable from narrative labour. While the women's narratives of remembering, survival, and storytelling offer an account of history that is erased, *When the River Sleeps* is a story born out of myth and travel. Yet this continuity does not carry forward colonial linearity. Rather, Kire's novel is built around indigenous cosmology about how to craft a story wherein ethical wisdom is earned by being attuned to the land and the cosmic world. The process of cultivating restraint, reciprocity, and respect is its central theme. Vilie's journey is not a pursuit of domination, nor is nature merely a backdrop but an active moral presence capable of withholding or giving sustenance depending on human behaviour. Though its protagonist is male, the moral architecture of the narrative speaks to care-oriented values frequently maintained through knowledge systems and community practices, as in women.

These texts, as they stand, reveal that decolonial storytelling is not bound by one form of narration. While Ao's fragmented short stories and Kire's mythic novel operate as separate works, they operate as challenges to the colonial epistemology of coherence, control, and anthropocentrism. Storytelling is a way of recasting relationships between past and present, human and nonhuman, and personal pain and collective survival. Memory and ethics are negotiated not only through representation but through the organizing principle of gender. Instead of imposing external theoretical frameworks, the analysis shows how concepts like ecology, gender and resistance emerge organically from the texts themselves. Through this reading, storytelling is brought to light as a living practice, a teaching for a responsible life amid losses, uncertainty and ecological precarity. Ao and Kire, in this sense, are not merely narrating Indigenous lives. Their narrative form enables them to enact indigenous epistemologies. Bringing *Laburnum for My Head* and *When the River Sleeps* into dialogue, the study analyses the plural scope of decolonial performance in Northeast Indian literature. It clears the way for future research on oral tradition, translation, indigenous feminist perspectives and the ethics of storytelling in other marginalized communities. Ultimately, it suggests that storytelling, including what Ao and Kire do, is not a decorative or nostalgic practice. It is a way of survival and resistance. Paying close attention to what stories convey and how they are delivered, it shows that decolonization is not only a political project but also a narrative one that is maintained with voices still speaking, remembering and imagining.

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