

Abstract

(Category : Fiction)

When the River Sleeps

Vilie, the protagonist of the novel, is the forest guardian who is paid by the Forest department to look after the endangered bird, Blythe's tragopan. He lives in the thickly wooded areas close to the village of Zuzie. He also looks after the majestic *gwi*, the domesticated bisons that roam in the wild and feed on tree fern. Vilie has chosen the solitary life of a forest dweller and remained unmarried. Despite repeated requests by his female relatives for him to take a wife, he has resisted them saying, 'The forest is my wife.'

When the book begins, Vilie is about to set off on a journey to find the mythical sleeping river, a story he has heard from other hunters which he retells in turn. The legend goes that any man who can wrest a heart-stone out of the Sleeping River can use it to gain wealth, grain, women, and victory in battle. Having had repeated dreams about the river, Vilie finally takes the decision to go on the journey.

The route he takes shows the readers the topography over which he travels: wood paths lead him to the Nepali settlement where a few families live and carry on logging as a livelihood. Beyond the Nepali settlement the map that Vilie will follow goes thus: long rows of fields, the nettle forest, groups of low hills, the unclean forest, country markets and the border village which serves as the entrance to the region of the sleeping river.

Vilie begins his travels and after being hosted by the Nepali family, he next meets bark harvesters at the Nettle forest. But the journeying has not all been smooth; Vilie, spending a night in a shed is attacked by a weretiger. He repulses the attack by addressing the weretiger using the name of its human owner. The following evening, he meets a group of

hunters and is happy to travel in their company, but in the dead of night, an inebriated hunter shoots dead the leader of the group. Vilie is also shot at when he discovers the murder, and he runs to safety only to discover that he has become a murder suspect. This encounter throws him off the path he was faithfully following to reach the sleeping river.

Vilie shelters in the unclean forest, feverish from the gunshot wound, recovers and eventually surrenders himself to the posse and is interrogated; eventually they are convinced of his innocence, and he continues on his way and meets women traders who guide him to the border village. He is hosted by the wise couple Kani and Subale. Kani accompanies him to the sleeping River where they find the river asleep and the body of water lying as still as a painting. They have to wait until the widow-spirits perform their strange ritual of fetching water and return to their dwellings up the hill. After they have gone, Vilie rushes in and the river awakens as he plucks a heart stone from it; the strong currents of the awakened river threaten to overwhelm him but he fights it and clings to his prize. When he climbs out of the river, the frantic race begins as the two of them are chased by the widow-spirits that jealously guard the territory of the river. The pair escape the widow-spirits when Kani uses his spiritual authority to command them to retreat.

Vilie discovers that getting hold of the heart-stone is only the beginning of his adventures. Subale warns him that he was now in great danger because now on, both humans and spirits would try to steal the heart stone from him. The old couple impart their wise teachings to him so that he can be guarded against spirit attacks.

Vilie leaves and traces his way back home with the heart-stone in his bag. He comes across the Tuesday market where he is warned not to

linger after the market is over as spirits take over the marketplace. He continues his journey the next day and comes to the strange village of the *Kirhupfümia*, a group of women with spirit powers outcasted by their ancestral villages. He is attacked on the second day by the bitter and twisted Zote who steals the heart-stone in order to avenge herself on her ancestral village. Vilie and his hostess Ate retrieve the stone only after Zote has destroyed the village completely and been killed in the process. When they find the village of the *Kirhupfümia* abandoned, they leave for Vilie's village.

Their path is fraught with danger and suffering as they first come to the shed where the killing of the hunter occurred; Vilie has to be purged of guilt for his failure to intervene when he had the chance to prevent the killing. After that Ate is attacked by a spirit tiger that kills her. Vilie engages fearsome spirit presences in a terrible spiritual combat until Ate is revived again. All these experiences teach Vilie the meaninglessness of wealth and treasures promised by the heart-stone; the real treasure that it offers is spiritual. As they battle spirits thwarting their progress, both Vilie and Ate continue to grow spiritually.

There comes a point when Vilie realises it is not the heart-stone that is to be valued but the spiritual wisdom that the creator-deity has imparted to him during the course of his journey to the sleeping river and back. He feels he is a very different man from the one who set off on the quest for the sleeping river. He is more drawn to the spirit side of life, and no longer attracted by the wealth the heart-stone promised to secure for him. The heart-stone promised him untold wealth and power but by the end of the quest, Vilie discovers for himself and for the reader the fact that true wealth and true power lie in understanding the spirit world and how to free oneself of all that the flesh is so vulnerable to.

They continue to travel homeward, and arrive at the Nepali settlement, only to be met by the tragedy Krishna and his wife murdered. The small beacon of hope is that the infant boy has survived and they rescue him effectively. Vilie, Ate and the baby head for Vilie's ancestral village where Ate finds a home for herself and her adopted baby with Vilie's aunts. Vilie returns to his forest home only to be attacked by the same person who had killed the Nepali couple. He tries to force Vilie to give him the heart-stone before he overpowers Vilie and stabs him repeatedly. Even as all seems to be over for Vilie, a weretiger appears on the scene, leaps at the killer and kills him. It is the killer's mangled body that is found by the village council after three days. They believe it is Vilie who has been murdered as there is no trace of the forest guardian. But the last chapter hints at the possibility that Vilie is still alive somewhere.

When the River Sleeps has been described as an invitation 'into the lives of the people of Nagaland: the rituals and beliefs, their reverence for the land, their close-knit communities – the rhythms of a life lived in harmony with their natural surroundings.'