



Creation and Destruction as Psychic Forces in Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*: A Psychoanalytic Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies Easterine Kire's novel, *Son of the Thundercloud*, using the Freudian psychoanalytical approach of the life and death drives. The novel, rooted in Naga myths and oral traditions, raises important questions about survival, loss, and renewal, which can be read through the lens of the human mind and its hidden desires. While much of the existing discussion on Kire's work focuses on folklore and spirituality, this study takes a different path by asking: What happens if we look at the narrative as a reflection of the psychological struggles between the desire for life and the pull to destruction and death? Using a close reading method, this research aims to highlight how Kire's novel reflects Freud's understanding of the human psyche, where life and death are inseparable and constantly in conflict. The objectives are to analyze how the characters embody these instincts, how cultural myths intensify the struggle, and how the story ultimately imagines the possibility of renewal despite death's presence. This study implies that psychoanalysis can offer new perspectives on reading indigenous literature. It suggests that beneath the mythic surface of Kire's novel lies a deeper exploration of what it means to be human- caught between the certainty of death and the hope for life.



Introduction

Naga literature is a vibrant and emerging body of work that reflects the rich oral traditions, myths, folklore, and history of the Naga people, indigenous to Northeast India. Traditionally, storytelling has served as a way to preserve cultural memory, pass down values, and engage with both personal and collective struggles. As Naga society modernizes, writers increasingly use literature to explore identity, memory, and the tensions between tradition and change. Their works act as bridges between generations, capturing the evolving experience of indigenous life while remaining deeply connected to ancestral narratives.

Dr. Easterine Kire is one of the foremost voices in Naga literature. Born in Kohima, Nagaland, she is a poet, short story writer, novelist, and children's author whose works are deeply rooted in Naga history, culture, and oral traditions. In 1982, she became the first Naga poet to publish in English, and in 2003, authored *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first Naga novel in English. Her novels are celebrated for blending myth, folklore, and indigenous spirituality with contemporary themes. Dr. Kire has received numerous awards, including the Governor's Medal for Excellence in Naga Literature and the Hindu Lit for Life Prize. She continues to contribute as a cultural ambassador, educator, and performer, inspiring younger generations to engage with literature and cultural memory.

Easterine Kire's novel, *Son of the Thundercloud* stands out as an intricate fable weaving myth, prophecy, and human struggle. The story follows Pelevotso (Pele), who, after losing his family to famine, meets two ancient sisters who guide him to Mesanuo, the tiger-widow. Mesanuo's unborn child, Rhalietuo, is believed to be the son of the thundercloud, born during the rare rainfall and destined to slay a mythical tiger responsible for ancestral deaths. The novel is a powerful meditation on loss, survival, hope, and the tension between life and death, deeply embedded in Naga myth and cultural identity.

Existing research on Kire's work provides valuable insights, primarily from cultural, ecological, and narrative perspectives. Sentilemla Lemtur (2019), an MA student in her research dissertation, "Convergence of Nature and Culture: An Eco-critical Study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*", emphasized the interconnection between human culture and nature. Lemtur argued that Kire's narratives illustrate how ecological crises and cultural memory shape each other. However, the study remains focused on external environmental and cultural factors, neglecting the psychological motivations or unconscious struggles of the characters.



Wedeu Mero and Dr. Thokchom Sunanda Devi (2024), in the journal article “Eco-Folklore and Indigenous Wisdom in Easterine Kire’s Novels”, highlights how Kire incorporates ecological folklore and indigenous wisdom as cultural resistance, promoting harmony between nature and humanity. This research shows the symbolic role of indigenous knowledge in sustaining cultural identity. Yet, the analysis does not examine how the characters wrestle with their internal conflicts, grief, or existential fears.

Akansha Rai and Shiv Govind Pyri (2025), in the article, “Rediscovering Narratives in Easterine Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud*” focuses on how the novel preserves indigenous oral traditions while addressing identity formation in a changing Naga society. Their study provides a deep understanding of the cultural and narrative structure but leaves the unconscious psychological motivations unexplored.

Santanu Kumar Samal (2025), in the research article, “Mythic Echoes and Indigenous Narratives: Tracing the Monomyth in Easterine Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud*” explores how the novel incorporates indigenous spirituality and the Monomyth structure. The study offers insight into the symbolic journey of the protagonist but does not apply any psychological theory to explain the characters’ inner struggles.

The Context Journal (2025), published “Easterine Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud*: Indigenous Wisdom and Ecological Sustainability”, discussing how the novel integrates spiritual, mythical, and ecological elements. The article focuses on the man-nature relationship and promotes ecological sustainability but overlooks the psychological dimensions of individual characters.

None of these existing studies engage with the unconscious desires, inner conflicts, or existential fears of the characters. This research addresses that significant gap by applying Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death drive). Instead of focusing only on culture, ecology, or narrative form, it explores the deep psychological forces that shape the characters’ actions, making *Son of the Thundercloud* a profound psychological study of the universal struggle between life and death.

Sigmund Freud’s essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) introduces the concepts of the life instinct (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos). According to Freud, Eros is the force that drives individuals toward survival, creativity, love, and connection, while Thanatos pushes them toward aggression, self-destruction, and ultimately, death. These opposing drives exist in constant tension, influencing both conscious decisions and unconscious impulses.



In *Son of the Thundercloud*, this conflict is central to understanding the characters' deeper motivations. Pele, Mesanuo, and Rhaliétuo are not only caught in external battles- against famine, societal rejection, and a mythical tiger- but are also struggling internally. Their journey symbolizes more than survival; it reflects an existential confrontation between clinging to life and surrendering to despair. By applying Freud's theory, the following analysis will explore how these unconscious drives shape the characters' choices, emotions and destiny, revealing the novel as a profound psychological exploration of the human condition.

The Life Drive: Eros in Son of the Thundercloud

Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* vividly illustrates the life drive through its characters and narrative. At the heart of this dynamic is Pele (Pelevotso), whose story is not one of despair alone but of a persistent urge to survive and connect. Despite losing his parents, wife, and children to famine, Pele does not surrender to nihilism. Instead, he continues to walk through barren lands, driven by an instinctive will to live. His journey is marked by quiet determination to find purpose beyond destruction. The narrative describes how Pele moves forward without knowing his destination, "except hunger, thirst and physical pain, he felt nothing." (Kire 17), but this does not render him lifeless. His perseverance reflects Eros- an impulse compelling him to search for human connection and meaning even after immense loss.

Mesanuo, the "tiger-widow", stands as a powerful symbol of the life drive. Her existence is not defined solely by grief, but also by the maternal love that sustains her. Despite losing her husband and seven sons to the mystical tiger, Mesanuo carries the possibility of creation and renewal. Her pregnancy by the rain god is portrayed not simply as a biological event, but as a symbol of hope – a chance for life to emerge from devastation. Kire writes, "I was to mother a son, not from the dust of earth, but from rain, because water is the purest form of life you can find" (Kire 141). Mesanuo's care for Rhaliétuo reflects the life drive's capacity to resist despair and nurture new life even in the bleakest circumstances.

Rhaliétuo himself becomes the clearest embodiment of Eros. His birth marks the convergence of prophecy, hope, and persistence. As the "Son of the Thundercloud," he signifies rebirth and redemption. His role in the story – both as a target of suspicion and as a figure of hope- highlights the paradox of the life drive: creation exists alongside vulnerability. The narrative emphasizes that Rhaliétuo's existence is not just for confronting the tiger but stands as a testament to life's insurance.



The rain emerges as a key symbol of nature's regenerative power. After centuries without rainfall, the sudden downpour connects human and natural worlds. The rain does not merely wet the earth but revives it, allowing crops to grow and life to persist. Pele asks, "How have you survived all these time? What have you found to eat when there has been no food for so long?" and Kethonuo replies, "Hope, sir, we have been living on hope."(Kire 20). The rain becomes Eros in its purest form- a sustaining force of life and renewal.

Finally, the novel hints at community restoration. Though the setting begins as desolate, the presence of Rhalietuo, Mesanuo, and Pele points toward healing. The revival of the land and the gradual acceptance of prophecy reflect the life drive at work on a social level. Kire shows that life persists in the face of death, not by ignoring destruction, but by striving to build, renew, and hope.

The Death Drive: Thanatos in Son of the Thundercloud

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Thanatos appears repeatedly as an oppressive and unavoidable force through various characters and narrative elements. Pele's tragic loss of his parents, wife, and children reflects this drive most poignantly. Their deaths do not occur as isolated incidents but rather symbolize the inevitability of destruction. Pele is left with nothing, wandering through barren lands, not as a hero embarking on a journey, but as a man driven by grief, unable to escape the shadow of loss. Freud's theory helps us understand that these deaths are not merely personal tragedies, but manifestations of Thanatos- an internal and external force that tears apart bonds and leaves no room for escape.

The three sisters- Kethonuo, Siedze, and Mesanuo- embody grief, suffering, and mourning throughout the story. Their repetitive lives, full of sorrow and marked by loss, reflect Freud's idea of repetition compulsion. They seem trapped in an endless cycle of mourning that offers no resolution. Each day is an echo of past pain, and their interactions with Pele suggest that grief has become their defining state. Kire presents them not as static figures but as living testimonies to the fact that Thanatos does not permit healing, only repetition. Their continued existence underscores how the death drive persists in preventing closure of transformation.

The barren lands and famine form another crucial embodiment of Thanatos in the novel. The landscape itself seems consumed by death, with endless stretches of drought, dry earth, and silence. The famine is not just a physical lack of food; it is a destructive force that represents the death drive at its most ecological level. The land resists fertility, denying growth, symbolizing how Thanatos operates on



both individual and environmental levels. The villagers' struggle to survive in this setting is marked by hopelessness, showing that destruction extends beyond the self to the natural world itself.

The mystical tiger stands out as the most terrifying symbol of Thanatos in Kire's story. This mythical creature is not only a predator but a force of fear, death, and impossibility. It prevents any possibility of regeneration or progress because every attempt to hunt it leads only to death. The tiger is a cruel reminder that some destructive forces are insurmountable. Rather than confronting or understanding the tiger, the characters are paralyzed by fear of its fatal power. This aligns closely with Freud's view of the death drive as repetitive and self-defeating – a force that compels repetition without resolution.

Finally, Mesanuo, the tiger-widow, becomes a powerful personification of Thanatos through her unresolved grief. The loss of her husband and seven sons to the mystical tiger has left an indelible mark on her life. Her past trauma is not something she overcomes but something she carries, symbolizing Thanatos as an ever-present, unyielding force. Her mourning is not a process of healing but a static of suffering, emphasizing how grief can become a part of identity itself.

Together, these narrative elements illustrate how Thanatos operates in *Son of the Thundercloud* as an unavoidable, oppressive, and cyclical force that prevents regeneration and healing, binding characters and landscape in perpetual suffering.

Conclusion

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Easterine Kire presents life and death not as opposing forces but as deeply interconnected. The story suggests that moments of life and renewal emerge from suffering and destruction. Pele's survival, the birth of the miracle child Rhaliuetuo, and the long-awaited rain are all born from famine and grief. The rain is symbolic of this paradox- it nourishes life but arrives with thunder, reflecting nature's ambiguous role. It nurtures life while simultaneously exposing vulnerability, showing that hope and renewal depend on the presence of Thanatos, not in opposition to it.

Freud's idea of repetition compulsion appears through cycles of famine, grief, and violence in the novella. The three sisters live repetitive lives of mourning, trapped in sorrow with no resolution. The barren land reflects this endless cycle of despair, as described,

“The earth was so dry that the soil no longer looked like soil. It had cracked apart, every brittle vein and ligament exposed, looking more like sun-dried sponge with big holes running through



the sod. The brown color had gone from the soil and if the traveler were to describe it, he would call it grey, death-grey. It had long given up the struggle to sustain any form of life". (Kire 17)

However, Kire introduces subtle shifts towards hope. The child Rhaliétuo, born during the first rainfall in centuries, symbolizes a break in the cycle – a chance for renewal and a new beginning. The gradual rebuilding of the community further reinforces this delicate balance between destruction and growth.

The mythical tiger stands out as a representation of Thanatos in its purest form. It is not merely a physical predator but also a symbol of hidden psychological trauma. The tiger embodies fear and destruction that cannot be confronted by ordinary means. Only Rhaliétuo, the child of prophecy, holds the unique role of facing it. His destined confrontation with the tiger reflects the psychoanalytic idea that healing requires facing repressed fears and internal death drives.

Finally, Kire elevates the indigenous myth of the Son of the Thundercloud beyond folklore. It becomes a profound psychological narrative, reflecting the universal human struggle between life and death. The legend offers a way to process trauma and see suffering as part of a greater cycle, rather than as senseless destruction.

This study opens up a new way of reading Naga literature. Historically, works like Kire's have often been seen through the lens of culture or history alone. But when we look at Son of the Thundercloud as a story of universal psychological struggle, it stands as a work that connects indigenous myths to global human experiences. The implication is clear: indigenous literature should not be seen as isolated cultural artifacts but as a meaningful contribution to understanding the shared human condition.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory of Eros and Thanatos provides a unique and insightful perspective on Son of the Thundercloud, revealing layers of meaning beyond its cultural and ecological narratives. The introduction of the study established the gap in existing research, which has focused largely on folklore, ecological sustainability, and identity, without delving into the psychological dimensions of the characters.

Through the analysis, it becomes clear that Pele, Mesanuo, and Rhaliétuo are shaped by an intense internal struggle between the drive to preserve life and the pull of death and despair. Their journey symbolizes more than survival in a harsh world; it reflects the universal human conflict of hope against suffering. The novella stands not only as fables rooted in Naga culture but also as a profound



study of the human psyche, showing how unconscious fears and desires shape individual destinies and reflect the timeless battle between life and death.

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