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The Fictional Narratives of Easterine Kire: A New Historicist Study

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Abstract

Easterine Kire enjoys a special status in the literary history of Nagas because of her meticulous portrayal of socio-cultural life. She is a pioneer in unravelling and reviving the greatness of Naga oral cultures, be it the folklore or knowledge of ancestral people. In her novels, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), we find a sensitive and authentic voices of the tribal people of Nagaland. Her narratives contain deep social awareness and cultural picture that invites us into the real life of the Naga people. What remains interesting is that Kire writes from her own standpoint using historical documents from Naga society. The paper highlights the fictional narratives of Easterine Kire. It develops a positive concept for understanding of the Naga socio-cultural dynamics and upholds their unique traditions.

Keywords: Social, Cultural, History, Patriarchal, Clan, Authentic, Tribal, Ancestral.

Introduction

History is a social and cultural product that endorses real experiences of people and gives a sense of intimate knowledge of the people and land. In literary studies, it is evidenced, which explains group behaviour because people define themselves and enact roles in terms of their social group membership. Easterine Kire's novels, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) record true historical experiences in humane way. For Kire, the technique of using honest narration is a necessity because without it, there would be no authentic documentation of Naga past. The fictionist has positively responded: "I have always used the real history of my people" (Kire. Email Interview. 2 March 2014). In using real history to explain her

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perspective, Kire has credibly restored documents that are viable for understanding of the Nagas. It offers a resourceful reading to non-Naga audience who wishes to have an insight into the Naga society. She has acknowledged," The 'native individual' is my raw material and I can write with confidence about their context because I have lived it too" (Kire. Email Interview. 2 March 2014).

The Nagas are Indo-Mongoloid tribal people traditionally known to have centred round self-reliant independent village states. Easterine Kire belongs to this group of people. She is a tribal Naga writer often vocal on historical and cultural issues confronting Naga society, and her fictional narrative carries a realistic presentation on it. She appears to give a right voice to her people who have tales to tell and experiences to share but do not find the desirable medium of expression. Her stories are often taken in as people's stories. In one of her interviews, she remarks: "…the telling of individual stories is so important to the teller. It is part of his or her healing and particularly amongst my people who have stories of deep pain and also wonder" ("Kire in *The Hindu*." www.thehindu.com/…/Easterine-kire/artic…). Kire's first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* tells the socio-cultural rituals and heroic deeds of a warrior village. It is a historical story of a true village society of Khonoma, wherein ordinary people meddle in everyday affairs of life. *A Terrible Matriarchy* is a bildungsroman, which follows the growth, emotions and experience of a female child. It exposes the perplexed tribal identity through the story of 'Dielieno' in her quest to "overthrow patriarchal position" (Barry 122). *Mari* contains the displacement story of Kohima and its people during the Second World War. *Life on Hold* unravels the voice of people trapped in the freedom struggle between the Indian State and the Naga Ethnic Insurgency group. *Bitter Wormwood* tells of an insurgency torn Naga society. *When the River Sleeps* is a mystical story that relates the tribal identity, its rituals, beliefs, their reverence for the land, and their close-knit communities. Kire has contributed a unique narrative voice, mainly to show the position of who a Naga is. The character sketch in each novel is all a classic epitome of Naga people. The proverb; "A real man does not need to roar to show that he is a man" as quoted in *A Naga Village Remembered* is insightful and attributive of Kire's understanding on the receptive native individual that nurtured the spirit of the people (25).

As appropriate in the fictional narratives of Easterine Kire's, contextual voices raised regarding the Naga socio-cultural dynamics, can well be recognized by arranging ideas in the following divisions:

Traditional Family Relationships

Family tie is an important integration factor. Among tribal societies like the Nagas, family is inherently essential. Kire's branded characters display strong familial bonds towards their families or relations within the society. In *A Naga Village Remembered*, Siezo is a father figure. Levi and Lato have lost their father at a very young age and so the paternal uncle Siezo naturally has to take up the missing father's role. He repaired their leaking roof and took Levi and Lato to the river to trap birds in winter giving them good memories. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, members of a family share responsibilities. The extended

family rallies around the elderly when they need assistance. Dielieno goes to help Neikuo when she falls sick. Grandmother has many helpers to take care of her daily chores. Family members support each other when there is a marriage, and death, kin families carry out funeral rituals. Everything is a collective affair. They care for one another in times of need. In *Mari*, the protagonist Mari's baby is taken care by her family. In *Bitter Wormwood*, Vilau is a young widow and though a good worker, it was hard at times to till the fields alone, so she often accepts help from her in-laws and male relatives. *Life on Hold* cautiously depicts patriarchal tradition where the eldest son shoulders the family responsibility. Zeu has that typical role. About nine months after his father, Pusalie's death, his paternal aunt Salienuo visited Zeu with a marriage proposal for him. Though a very attractive offer, he turned it down saying he would never marry. He was very adamant in devoting his life to pay off the debts his father had taken in his lifetime. Kire's byword in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, "there are times in life when you have to sacrifice something that you really like in order to have peace into the family" is suggestive of Zeu's temperament in sacrificing his happiness for the bliss of his family (73). It stands true for he realizes the weight of his father's debts had always been overriding and in "no way would he have children and let them grow up with the same burden" (*Life on Hold* 77).

Naga society is patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal and thus descent is traced from the father's side. As head of the family, the father is expected to provide for and maintain the position of the family. In *A Naga Village Remembered,* the central protagonist Kovi has to surrender himself to familial responsibilities. He performs the role of a responsible father when his pregnant wife falls ill. Despite his firm judgement that it is women's business to assist in birthing, he waits patiently for the naming ritual and as the child squeals into the world, "Kovi quickly smeared saliva on his finger and touched it to his son's forehead with the word, 'first'" signifying that the child belongs to him (5). In patriarchal system, it is also a way to ensure the ritualistic beliefs of the society. Identity is strictly determined by birth, and so claiming and naming a 'new born' by family members recurs frequently because it explains the distinction through which individuals are culturally identified as belonging to or as members of the particular clan. In *Bitter Wormwood*, the midwife advises Vilau to think of a name soon for her newborn son, because it guarantees the child's identity in the clan group as well "protects them from being taken by spirits" (17). They believe that names always have power over individual destinies, therefore, grandmother Khrienuo names her newborn grandson as Moselie; "It means one-who-will-meet-life-without-guile" and she expresses it as a good name entailing that Moselie will never plot to harm another person (17).

Clan Elders: The Voice of Authority

The basic social organization of the Naga society is the clan, and it plays a major role. All members of a clan use common name after their personal names. Therefore, the clan relationship is very strong and members act collectively in all activities, be it in village building, construction of clan member's houses, construction of clan dormitories

for various age groups, cooperative support during marriages or funeral of clan members, shared responsibilities during wars, ceremonial events, festivals, and so forth. Clan bonds are very rigid and effective in the Naga society. The clan is powerful and its power is vested in the clan elders, "the custodians of the laws of the land" (*Folk Elements* 17). Clan elders in Kire's narrative are decision makers and initiator of all rituals. They have duties to instruct and educate younger man on the paths of life. For example, In *A Naga Village Remembered*, elders instruct Vilau during the five days ritual. He is informed to hoe a new water channel, make fire from split bamboos and many other things to complete his first tiger killing rituals. Again, the clan elders of Thevo and Thepa initiate the ritual ceremony of Keviselie's feast of merit. It is the elders, who negotiate the treaty after the war with the British. The elders say, "We have been the ones to kill last since we killed them in Assam so it is alright to talk of peace now" (85). Accordingly, as an obligation towards his village people and to his dead kin, Pelhu, a respected elder of Khonoma, speaks with a calm dignity and thus concludes the peace treaty between village representatives of Khonoma and the representatives of the British Government at Mezoma. In tribal societies, clan elders are considered as having paramount power on things that require settlements, be it family property, ancestors land or fields. The living elders always take care to tell their children what should be done to their belongings after their death, because if they do not, there might be disputes over that. Lands and fields are divided according to elders' will and are shared among heirs. In *Bitter Wormwood* Khrienuo's decision to give her house to the grandson is incited by this act of elders. She feels it necessary to order a property will and pronounce it because she is sure that if she does not act while she is alive, a time may come where relatives may blame her for anything that arises out of this situation. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the grandmother makes a similar will by saying: "I see no reason why I may not call him Vini. … This house will go to the boy when I am gone" (237). Elders also act as custodian of the customary laws of the land or village administrations. The elders ensure proper execution according to accepted laws. *Mari* is an example. We get a concise experience of elder's settlement law, when Mari talks about the registration of her two children according to the customary law of the village council. She confirms the children's right to settle in the land of their birth and own property if they chose to.

Societal Conformity of Marriage

Marriage is a socially permitted and accepted union of an adult male and an adult female. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the grandmother defines marriage as "a mixing of blood" and the same can be insightful in reference to Nagas exogamy system of marrying outside the family groups (197). The Naga societies perceive marriage as fulfilling a social obligation to obtain heirs for family hierarchy. Marriage in traditional society is a family affair and it involves numerous rituals. The protagonist Levi's marriage in *A Naga Village Remembered* invites a fascinating observation on how marriage ceremony is conducted. The proposal is brought to the notice of the boy by a female relative as in the episode of the paternal aunt Niseno visiting Levi with a marriage offer. She speaks: "Son, there is a fine woman of the Semo clan, Riatso's sister. ... She is a good worker and her family is

a titled family so they are our equals. I want you to consider the matter carefully" (47). Levi carefully thinks over his aunt's suggestion, and the idea of becoming a householder suddenly seems attractive to him. He ponders to be a title taker like his father and have many sons to carry his name. Levi agrees and his aunt takes Levi's proposal to the girl's family, as is the custom. Likewise, in *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the marriage proposal is taken to the girl's family by a female relative of the boy. In Vini's marriage, grandmother herself negotiates the marriage to Nisano's family. She speaks on behalf of Vini and highlights the inheritance he will get from her. "I am settling the Vurie field for him which is the biggest in the area" (208). In social custom of marriage, there is also a personal liberty. A girl has the right to accept or refuse a proposal. Though sometimes her family might insist that she accepts it when the boy's family is better placed in society or is wealthy. *Life on Hold* positions this rather perplexing marriage situation. Nimeis upset when Abeiu's family comes with marriage proposal. She does not like to wed a man thirteen years older and someone that she does not love, but her brother Zeu ascertaining their family enormous debts firmly asks her to consider the marriage, as it will save her family name in society.

Native Ideology of Friendship

Friendship is vital for social beings. It is the highest form of socialization. Among tribal societies the resolutions for friendship is strictly adhered to and the friendship is to last forever. Every village seeks friendship and alliances with its neighbouring village because it ensures peace, and people learn to conform to the norms of the society by interacting with one's close associate. *A Naga Village Remembered* tells us of the village alliance friendship, in which villagers cluster together to ensure the reputations of the village. *Life on Hold* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* have references of childhood friendship. It is a fact that man is a social being and he needs company to best compliment his existence, and this is what Kire's native societies is all about. In friendship, the individual learns the standard that is necessary in the art of living.

In Kire's depiction of tribal personality, the meaning of friendship takes a core role. Friends aid and support one another at all times, and the same is true in *Bitter Wormwood*. Mose and Neituo are portrayed as thick friends who are worthy of each other. As children, they go to school together on their own and are proud that they are able to go unescorted by their parents. The lines, "Mose was always accompanied by Neituo. Of the two, Mose was more diligent. Neituo was not unintelligent but he was lazy", appear as a kind of ingredient that complements both their characters, as one having unity (24). Shortly after their school closes down because of the tumultuous freedom movement, Mose and Neituo together join the Naga Underground soldiers to combat Indian armies for a free Nagaland. Life in the 'underground' is rigorous but they are eager to take it all. They feel exhausted from the unaccustomed harshness of their new lifestyle. Their overworked muscles protest when they lay down in their rough sleeping bags but the reason that keeps them in good spirit is because they have each other's company. They sincerely believe that if they both give their best as soldiers of the Underground Naga Army, their land would be free soon. Kire gives a perpetual touch on Mose and Neituo's friendship. When Mose dies suddenly, it splinters

Neituo's life as well. The benevolent action of Neituo sitting beside Mose's throughout the day and his refusal to leave Mose's dead body by pleading, "We only have today, bear with me," is a symbolic evocation painted by Kire to glorify and connote native ideology; the virtue of true friendship (225).

Ethics of Community

The Nagas live a communal life. Individual interest is negligible because their works are driven by interest of the community in general. As the goal of action is internal to itself, one does not feel alienated from the act nor from the society. In *A Naga Village Remembered*, Easterine Kire unfolds it by describing the regular chore of a native elder, Kovi, whose life is wedded to the activities of the village. His heart warms at sight of women returning in small groups with their carrying baskets stacked with firewood in the wee hours of morning. One can envision village life through Kovi's thoughtful commentary on how women would set out before dawn to fetch firewood for the day. Not yet dawn, Kovi could also notice smoke curling up from the houses hugging the slopes and the still dark houses in the valley, signaling that the cooking of the morning meal is in progress. In the exposition of communal understanding among native writers, Kire is conspicuous because her stories advocate core optimism of community values. She promotes communal attachments through the quoted teaching of elders who have moral voices at hand. It is the elder's responsibility to train youngsters to the community life. For example, in 'Kichuki' (house where young men learn various practical skills, art, and the oral history of the people) elders constantly teach Levi and his age mates on how to behave and live in a community. Kire proves to be equally a good writer of community life in *Bitter Wormwood*. She gives importance to the community right from the beginning of the story by portraying Mose as a respected elder. Young men seek him out to listen to his stories, his peers desire his counsel when it comes to land disputes and other clan disputes. Mose is a freedom fighter who has vast experience of worldly wisdom. Thus, the narration circles around memories of Mose as he tries to locate ordinary people whose lives are completely overturned by the freedom struggle. He could clearly remember the freedom struggle he had been a part of, and the struggle that the "dead-eyed young man of today" claimed to be part of (12). The Nagas had been fighting against the takeover of their ancestral lands by the new nation of India. Mose now a seventy year old has his position and he feels very proud to be a freedom fighter. *Mari* is again a dairy novel that mirrors the story of a community experience during the World War II. Kire acknowledges the oral narrators for telling exciting stories about the World War II and the Japanese invasion of Nagaland, which have altered their life completely. She elucidates by saying: "What is so remarkable about World War II, which is still referred to as 'The War' by the Nagas, is that people have very little memory of what they were doing before the war years. I was left with the impression that the war, for us, was almost equivalent to the big bang, the beginning of all life" (Introduction viii).The idea of community encouragement towards one another in *Mari* is more reflective than in any other novel. She keeps the entire community at the focus and presents a particular view where one comes across a strong feeling of community. Mari shares

that by the end of 1944, all the inhabitants of Kohima returned home. They returned to find their houses burnt down and uninhabitable so that building of houses became a communal activity. The happiness of community depends on ones relationship to another. Essentially, in Kire's narrative, community plays a superior role. It gives a sense of commune values, personal interaction governed by sentiments of trust, cooperation and altruism not just for individual self but also for other people in the social order.

Conclusion

A general redirection of literary studies back towards history and admitting the past with an interest involvement in the present is a welcome addition to rediscover cultural identity. It helps one to uncover the subject matter that requires potential attention, be it the historical or political conflicts, and give life meaning for understanding and the sustenance of contemporary social order. The fictional narratives of Easterine Kire are fruitfully educative because her stories act as political exercises in that she reclaims, readdresses, redefines and saves the Naga culture and history from misrepresentation. Pointedly, Kire is an objective author and thinker who writes on the social, political, economic and cultural issues affecting the tribal society. She aims at the self-empowerment of her society and redesigns an articulation that can provide a reference point for them.

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