



MAPPING MEMORIES AND ORALITY IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *A RESPECTABLE WOMAN*

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Abstract: The Naga society has always been always been an egalitarian one as the value system that is enshrined in the socio-cultural life is well encoded in the oral tradition, which is the depository of their history. Though the advent of Christianity and Westernization has altered the lifestyle to an overwhelming state, the Nagas still have not given up their reliance on the culture and tradition that has made them a distinct people. Easterine Kire is one amongst pioneer Naga writers and novelists in English. She takes incidents and facts from the lives of her people and weaves them into stories which are like documents and chronicles of the marginalized voice of the Nagas. The paper focus on Kire's *A Respectable Woman* which reflect the variety of subjects the Naga world offers, the articulation of voices which remained silent and unknown, and identities which have been misrepresented or misinterpreted through bias, ignorance, discrimination and stereotyping. As Kire divides the narrative into two broad sections – told through the stories of Khonuo, who was ten years old when the Japanese invaded Kohima and her daughter Kevinuo, who is the novel's narrator; Kire maps memories and brings out the up scaled oral traditions of the Nagas through her character Khonuo as she recounted to her daughter in fragments nearly 44 years after the war, piecing together the aftermath of the destruction and the rebuilding of homes and lives. As Khonuo narrates about the past, the people would scramble to get their lives back to normal. Thus, the paper aims to reflect on mapping memories of the past and orality of the Nagas in Kire's *A Respectable Woman*.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Memory, Post colonialism.

I. INTRODUCTION:

1. The Naga Society – Past to Present:

The Naga society has always been always been an egalitarian one. There are no classes and each member belongs to a clan or khel in the village. Their cultural life is governed by a set of practices and beliefs which were and are upheld with utmost respect. The value system that is enshrined in the socio-cultural life is well encoded in the oral tradition, which is the depository of their history. The Nagas are a fun loving people; they have festivals to commemorate different occasions which have a close association with their agricultural life. Dignity, pride and fame also constitute their outlook. Though the Nagas' religious practices were not uniform, most tribes believed in a higher being or spirit, named or unnamed, in whom was all powerful. The Nagas also have a well-organized institution called morung to educate and prepare the youth to become responsible members of the society.

The problem of representation/misrepresentation is closely associated with the question of identity. Nagas have always wrestled with the problem of representation as they struggle with dual identity- how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets in the book *Identity Theory* writes, "when it comes to identities, perceptions are the inputs to identities, in particular, perceptions are meanings in the situation that are relevant to the identity" (Burke & Stets, 65). For a long time, Nagas have formed their identity from the perception of others. They have allowed themselves to become what others have said about them. However, the new generation writers have embraced their indigenous identity and make a serious effort to recover their ethnic identity before they were colonized. Today, identity for them is the collective sum of the indigenous qualities and beliefs of their people.

The precipitation of the transition was bewildering in many senses; in just a matter of a century of encounters with 'other' cultures, mainly the Western encounter, the cosmology of the Nagas was transformed so drastically that the present generation is still grappling to come to terms with the changes. And to make the situation worse, the transfer of power in 1947 between British and India left the Nagas, along with other Northeastern frontier groups, in a problematic future. Later, Nagas with their demands for sovereign state found themselves at loggerheads with India and seemingly became "reluctant citizens who were not attuned with the 'great modern desire' to forge a new postcolonial Indian nation" (Kikon, 85). Though the advent of Christianity and Westernization has altered the lifestyle to an overwhelming state, the Nagas still have not given up their reliance on the culture and tradition that has made them a distinct people. In fact, there is a blending of their age-old culture with the imbibed Western modernity which creates a new definition of the Naga identity today.

2. Postcolonialism in Naga Writings:

Postcolonialism emerged as a discipline in literary studies only in the 1990s. This discipline has now attained wide currency on account of the influence of such works as Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* (1980). It has embraced a number of aims: most fundamentally, to re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized; to determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizer; to analyze the process of decolonization; and to participate in the goals of political liberation, which include equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities.

For the Northeast, writing or raising voice in the light of some ongoing issues through any medium has always remained a challenge. In spite of emerging in the literary world only recently, most of the writings from the Northeast share a common subject matter concerning the state, terror, violence, memory and displacement and also explore rootedness and autobiographical experiences. Temsula Ao, the renowned Naga writer says that the most significant aspect of Naga writings is that it has directly or indirectly derived inspiration from the oral tradition of storytelling which is replete with different forms of literature like poems, folk songs and stories, long narratives. Their writings are a testament that the past heritage is still an integral part of the present reality of the people which is why literature is very relevant for the Nagas today. The traditional customs, beliefs and practices handed down orally to the successors create a sense of community response and responsibility as "much oral storytelling conveys a religious sensibility that stresses ideals of reciprocity, wholeness and beauty and so expresses a deep sense of attachment between a people and the land they inhabit" (Garrard, 126). Therefore in Naga literature, storytelling is not only centered on narrating stories alone but narrating their history to the young generations. Today, it is through this oral mode of storytelling that Naga writers write about their struggles and their painful past.

3. Easterine Kire as a Naga Writer:

Easterine Kire is one amongst pioneer Naga writers and novelists in English. She has to her credit a number of poetry collections, *Kelhoukevira*, *The Windhover Collection*, *Jazzpoetry* and other poems. She is also best known for her novels and short stories. Her fictional works, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Forest Song* (2011), *Once in a Faraway Dorg* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019), are a realistic read on Naga society that transcendentally witnessed large scale changes in cultural, social, religious and political arena. She is also a recipient of several awards and Literary Prizes for her works.

Kire's simple and evocatively written novels bring alive the history, native identity, culture, traditions, rituals, beliefs and the geography of her time and place in the life of the Naga people. She takes incidents and facts from the lives of her people and weaves them into stories which are like documents and chronicles of the marginalized voice of the Nagas. In her poetry, short stories, folk tales and novels, she writes from an understanding of the historical dialectics of the Naga people and a life intimately connected with the struggles of her people. They are the articulation of voices which have remained silent and unknown, those stories and identities have been misrepresented or misinterpreted through bias, ignorance, discrimination and stereotyping. With her publications being well received, she believes her writing the stories of her people will help them find healing in reading about it.

Kire's written orality has also formulated an authentic representation of Naga oral traditions. This is justifiably a reason because the 'Native individual' has now moved out from the oral to the written culture. In short, it is important to give the 'native individual' a voice in written narrative. The shift from primary orality to secondary orality not only implies that cultures are compelled to elaborate new rhetorical styles in order to communicate knowledge by employing a different medium; the shift also involves a major transformation of thought itself. Kire has tried to share pieces of native oral histories through storytelling and has devoted a great deal of attention to elucidating how this orality may be linked in a written performance.

II. MAPPING MEMORIES AND ORALITY IN A RESPECTABLE WOMAN:

In *The Location of Culture* Homi K. Bhabha states that: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha, 63). The memories of the past are deeply rooted in the conscious of the colonized in such a way that it affects their present. This remembering of the colonial past which uncovers the violent face of colonialism makes the hostile and antagonistic past more familiar and approachable. It is directly related to the past traumas of the colonized and the errors of the colonizer. Postcoloniality, thus, reveals the realities of the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized.

Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) is the latest novel which solely focuses on having an identity of one's own. She divides the narrative into two broad sections – told through the stories of Khonuo, who was ten years old when the Japanese invaded Kohima and her daughter Kevinuo who is the novel's narrator. At first, the reader is taken through the memories of Khonuo, called as Azou (mother), recounted to her daughter in fragments nearly 44 years after the war, piecing together the aftermath of the destruction and the rebuilding of homes and lives. When the novel reaches the birth of the narrator, the focus shifts to Kevinuo and her journey from childhood to adulthood in a changed Nagaland, amid growing modernity and youthful aspirations. The novel brings to light a society which is trying to cope with change while struggling to hold onto its traditions. It recounts through historical fiction, the twentieth century life of the proud Kohima, Nagaland.

As Khonuo narrates about the past, the people would scramble to get their lives back to normal. They would rebuild their homes and begin the cycle of school and field going. When the war was over and the missionaries delayed to return back to Nagaland, educated men like Mr. Neiliehu Belho and Mr. Vibeilie Belho opened a school for a short period of time as "they knew very well that education offered a better life and wanted us to reap the advantages of western education" (Kire, 24). Khonuo and her sister Zeu were less than keen to go back to their studies once the schools reopen, with much to their parents' dismay. For them and many girls of their age who did not rejoin schools, the missionaries came up with a plan, "Not only would they learn to bake, they would also learn to converse in English and pray a short prayer. It was called the 'one-minute-prayer' and was designed to help the girls to speak English" (Kire, 21). This simple anecdote illustrates the map to modernization that white missionaries charted for many tribal communities in the North East – through a convent 'English

medium' education. So deeply ingrained is this notion that even today only a convent upbringing and a position in the administration can earn one the title of a 'respectable woman'(or man).

Another memory of the post war Kohima is when Khonuo narrates about the people in the past who were more broad-minded, more tolerant, more understanding and less quick to judge than they are today. They have seen the devastations of war and "people who know what it's like to lose everything almost overnight, homes, loved ones, and life" (Kire, 37) in the war. The result of war in the end was a "strange time" where they saw some people doing the meanest things and some people doing the noblest actions. The novel also provides an important nuance in understanding the complex relationship between British administrators and many of the Naga tribes. After Independence, the missionaries were ordered to leave by the Indian government in retaliation for protests over the forceful annexation of Naga areas. Of the last missionary family to leave India, Kire writes, "Reverend Supplee was a musician who had written songs on Kohima which were sung by different generations of Nagas in later years. During their stay in Kohima, Ruth Supplee, the missionary's wife, was frequently sick and would spend days confined to her bed. Many people were sad to see them go" (Kire, 23). She evokes a similar sense of abandonment felt by many Nagas upon the final departure of the administrators: "The village people were saying, 'Our parents are leaving us'. It was uttered with sadness and a sense of helplessness" (Kire, 57).

Kire also demonstrates with great insight how lives go on – from weddings to funerals – even in the middle of crisis. Death as inevitable is analyzed in the novel through Mengutuolie, Kevinuo's father, who died on the New Year Eve due to weak heart disease, evoking pain in the reader's mind. Interestingly, Khonuo went against traditions and boundaries to tie knot with her weak husband inspite of her aunt Nisou who warns her, "you are courting widowhood if you decide to go ahead with this marriage" (Kire, 32). They managed to have twelve wonderful years of marriage life without fighting and made each day count. She also wants her daughter to find happiness in the kind of marriage she was in. Bonuo, the grandmother of Kevinuo represents the traditional type of women in the novel. With the unfortunate death of her two sons- Amo and Razou at an early age, Kire brings out the condition of a pathetic mother who becomes a living dead. When Kevinuo was thirteen and the grandmother dies, she says, "It just felt right. She was more there than here; she missed her sons so much that I was almost relieved when she finally died" (Kire, 41). Death portrayed by Kire in her novel is sometimes merciful. Razou who dies at seven affected the psycho of the mother who behaved strange as to talk about her dead son and when new people visited her house and ask about her family, she would say she has two daughters and two sons and when asked in detail about their position, she would say the younger son does nothing. Even after years when Bonuo is with her grandchildren – Kevinuo and Ato, she has a strange habit of minutely examining them and comment, "Just like Razou at your age" (Kire, 27). At thirty-nine, when Amo, a vibrant young man who everyone loved, dies of a war wound that never healed, it became unreal and unacceptable. Bonuo was heartbroken and kept fainting again and again at the funeral. She dreamt of Amo and Razou who were standing on the other side of the river waving at their mother, which helped her to recover and in no time, joins them. Thus, Kire does not miss to mention the Nagas' belief in dream and supernaturalism which is a part the rich Naga orality.

Alcohol abuse became a visible social problem in Nagaland during the post-war Kohima. Kire also projects the picture of death as imminent when Vilhoulie, the drunkard dies due to 'cirrhosis of the liver' resulting from acute alcoholism. He was a good singer and a regular church goer with his wife but he became frustrated in life when his wife met a tragic death while childbirth. When drunk and roaming around in the street, he appears to be "the most terrifying one" (Kire, 87). In the past when Kevinuo asked Beinuo what she would do if her husband beat her, Beinuo would beat her husband right back as " He has no right to beat me, I won't let him"(Kire, 106). This statement becomes ironical in the present Beinuo's life. She becomes the victim of her own choice, Meselhou. Gender inequality also portrayed in the novel when the girl child Melhouvinuo (Uvi) was born to them. Meselhou did not visit his wife and newly born daughter whom he expects to be a boy child. Out of frustration in his drunkenness, he beat up Beinuo and later on when a boy child was born only to be dead; Meselhou pushes her down the steps and beats his wife to dead. Thus, her tragic death defines the outcome of the dark patriarchal society. Storytelling connects the myth and the reality. There are numerous incidents in *A Respectable Woman* supporting the myth. Native affirms that spirits of the dead haunt the places they always frequented when they were alive, and they seek out their constant companions because those are the ones who would feel sentimental and would assist them to return. Such Spirits belong to men who have found no rest and returns to trouble people. Khonuo also narrates about her past as to how they would hear the spirits of the dead soldiers marching past their quarters in the Garrison Hill area late at night. There was also an Angami woman whose lover came to her only at night. As she grew very sickly after few weeks, her aunt became suspicious of her relationship and instructs her to tie a bit of thread to her lover's clothing only to find the thread tracing to the grave of a Sikh soldier the next morning. Kire's abundant use of native tale is projected mainly to focus on a specific Naga context, such of storytelling skills that keep the beliefs alive just as 'spirit' sighting helps the continuance of the story tradition. A native categorically assumes that stories contain embodiment of truths and represent reality.

Notably, it is not only the new religion of Christianity that has disturbed the social outlook, the emerging modernity through education, too, has its impact on the Nagas. The society in *A Respectable Woman* is one, making a transition from an agricultural society to modern society. The empowerment of Khonuo and Kevinuo in the story comes with modern education. Kire's protagonist Kevinuo is, in essence, a modern woman who sees education as a key to freedom. She is her own person, not opinionated but warm. She has a clear sense of right and wrong no matter what the cultural interpretation of her aunts dictate. The Naga writer further expressed the concern that culture, cultural expressions and cultural loss, cultural lapse and the waning of the oral history will show that the role of indigenous education remains central to the reconstruction of Naga identity. This role paints the importance of Nagas' own initiatives to preserve and keep their indigenous knowledge and history alive. Naga identity has been kept alive through oral history, the tradition of storytelling.

III. CONCLUSION:

Literature is used as an agent for peace to remember the painful past and move forward to a life that transcends hatred and bitterness in a conscious effort to foster a positive and peaceful environment for its future generations. Today, Native writers across the world aim to liberate themselves from the hatred and bitterness that have dominated their lives. However for these people, 'to forgive' does not mean that they will forget or disregard the struggles and the incomprehensible violence meted out to their people years ago. As Graham Spencer very reasonably argues in his book *Forgiving and Remembering in Northern Ireland: Approaches to Conflict Resolution*, wrote that forgiving "does not mean that we want to excuse them punishment, or to minimize what they did" (Spencer, 24) but it is simply the acquisition of the wisdom that they will no longer be dominated or defined by violence, hatred and bitterness. It is here that literature opens an avenue for these

native people whereby they can remember and memorialize these painful pasts in their literatures and use it not as a weapon to injure or to take revenge but as a burning request to be heard and to be listened.

Kire's written orality explains an existential life of native individual and community predominantly drafted from the backdrop of oral tradition. She applies native orality and historical event simply as story to voice social opinion and addresses herself as a socialist writer thinking of new ways to help people from the many atrocities, native people living within an invisible prison of repression, denial freedom of expression, nationhood and most painfully the basic living including the right to life itself. Just as oral narrators use 'primary orality' (that of persons totally unfamiliar with writing) to interlink messages, Kire as author of written word uses 'secondary orality' embedding the word in visual space more definitely.

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