

“[Re]shaping History through Orality: A study of Kire’s “*Sky Is My Father*”

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Abstract:

Oral narrative is a heritage and integral part of Naga culture to keep the customs, traditions and values alive. These past oral narratives of struggle and existence forms a part of the memory. The stories form an essential background as it serves as a window to the history and experiences of the natives. Prior to the written literature the customs and traditions, its values were preserved in language without a script system. But it is reduced to barbarianism and superstitions through colonial gaze with the advent of British and their missionaries. Re-visiting this oral narrative through memory-writing is an attempt to bridge the gap between the past and future. The present paper studies *Sky Is My Father* as the basis to understand the role of culture, belief and memory in shaping the history of Nagas. It attempts to comprehend the history and struggle of the Angami clans; for their freedom against British repression, bringing alive The Battle of Khonoma. The idea is to explore and understand the state of Nagaland, its people and history through culture and beliefs from the insider’s perspective and through the method of memory- writing.

Keywords: Memory, History, Tradition, Khonoma, Orality.

Introduction

Writing is a powerful tool and when it comes to history, it gains an immense strength as it shapes the identity. We have always seen and known North-Eastern states with its geographical boundaries as a part of India, but the identity of a place is more than just its boundaries. It is also defined by the tradition and its history and culture. One such place is Nagaland which is one of the least explored and known places, where most of the history is narrated through going down the memory lane in the form of stories and with the help of orality, and is passed down on to generations. The author Eastrine Kire uses this community memory of human experiences as the raw material in shaping and re telling the stories of the great Agnami warriors in *The Battle of Khonoma*.

Eastrine Kire is a well-known name when it comes to north- eastern literature. A poet, short story writer and novelist from Nagaland.

Her works include Mari(2010), Bitter Wormwood(2011), The Son of the Thundercloud and many others. She wrote Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered in 2003- the first 'Naga' novel written in English. Through her memory- writing Kire provides us an insider's view of authenticity and removes off the mask of the artificial identity being created by 'The Occidents'. The language of memory here becomes important as "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of truth, order and reality becomes established" (The Empire Writes Back, 7). Kire has rightly pointed out this while sharing her views on "Writing Historical Fiction" at NECU (North East Christian University) that "We have to look at the history from our own perspective. We have lots of records, but by outsiders, not by us".

The novel which is discussed in the paper describes the socio- cultural and heroic deeds of a village warrior. It is a historical and true story of the village of Khonoma which engages its people and their life which is filled up with their beliefs and the age old methods. Originally published under the title "A Naga Village Remembered", the novel weaves together various oral narratives in a fabulous prose. The story is of a community who is proud of its roots and undergoes radical changes both internally and externally. The outward resistance is represented through The Battle of Khonoma against the British in the nineteenth century with 22 raids. The communities took pride in fighting for their independence and existence of rituals which was being called superstitions and taboo and looked down upon through the eyes of barbarianism with the increasing interference of colonial missionaries. This brutal fight of saving their identity and following their customs eventually resulted in their identity being synonymous with cannibals, murderous etc. Kire writes back with full authority and pride and rectifies this outlook through the multiple oral narratives, customs and beliefs. The novel shows the deep connection of Nagas with their land and community and their rituals. She portrays the naked reality of Kohima and the treatment of Britishers towards them. This paper attempts to highlight the tradition through the use of memory and the Naga views about the war and the traumatic changes after the Battle which created havoc in their lives.

Literature review

The review of Literature for this paper has been carried out by analyzing important journals and scholarly articles and interviews related to the novel The Sky Is My Father. Through a careful examination of these available resources, it can be said that not much has been written about the novel as the material available was scanty. Though the novel is approached from the perspective of taboo and history, there are quite a few materials available concerning the tradition and memory perspective.

The journal "Taboo themes in Eastrine Kire's Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered" talks about the interaction between human beings and taboos in the Nagaland culture. The essay concludes the fact that through following taboos, the people of their clans take the responsibility of the protection of village. The violation of any is objectionable and is related to fear among the Nagas. With the due course of time some taboos lost its meaning and became almost meaningless. Some still continue to hold meaning and importance in their lives, a few of them can be found in the novel. Thus, the point of whole system of taboo belief is to hold together the social values and community.

Data and Methodology

When it comes to research, the data plays an important role. It is mainly of two types: Primary Data and Secondary Data. The data used for this paper have been evaluated from books, journals, PDFs, interviews on different platforms and therefore the data is secondary in nature. When one mentions the term methodology, it refers to the method of investigation for a particular study. For the purpose of this research, the ‘critical analysis’ method is used on the basis of available data on the topic. Further, the topic is also viewed from the post- colonial perspective and post- modernist perspective of meta- narrative. Within these given frameworks the memory, tradition and history in the novel is analyzed which influenced the shaping of the Naga identity.

Memory

Memory plays an integral part in the existence of any culture and community as well as in the shaping of history. The subtitle of the novel *A Naga Village Remembered* provides us the evidence and importance of memory in the novel providing us a window to the natural existence and spiritual world of Nagas. Kire uses this city escape for her stories giving visuals of Nagaland and its rich flora and fauna with the world around the bird calls and natural rhythms. The use of orality is a crucial part as there is no written literature and the elders are the only living resources, as mentioned in the text; “...but if the elder were there, the younger men listened closely without speaking much. They came to learn the stories of the village. It was good to be called a thehou no, a child of thehou- it meant that such a person was well- versed in the stories and customs of the village.” (Sky Is My Father, 7)

Stories are a living entity when it comes to the native literature as it attempts to come to terms with the past and, an attempt to find a future; as notably mentioned by a famous Nigerian story-teller Ben Okri “We live by stories, we also live in them.”

Kire uses the simple elegant narrative style for her completely unusual stories that interweaves Naga folklore and beliefs with her own personal and community experiences. Kire harvests community memory by collecting old narratives and proverbs like;

“A man who lets brew drink him instead of he drinking it is no man.” (Sky Is My Father, 29)

Memory in the novel can be classified as; community memory, personal memory and family memory. The novel uses community memory which acts like a vault holding treasures like village history, lore of the folks, the native wisdoms, proverbs, customary laws etc. These memories provide legitimacy for the Naga centric history of *The Battle of Khonoma*.

The importance of orality is reflected in the novel at a point where only the words are enough for a peace treaty between the clans and the British government. Oral tradition worked on trust and wisdom.

“If we have said there will be peace between us, there will be peace. We do not need to write it down.” (Sky Is My Father,107)

Tradition

Sky Is My Father brings us to a land of vibrant culture and various communities. Every community has its own set of guiding principles in the form of traditions. These forms an essential part of their lives and its violation is believed to bring harm not just to the family but to the whole community. The belief that tradition was created for the sense of security and to keep intact the roots and the clans together. These traditions influence a lot in their decision- making especially in relation to the other clans and any event of merry- making. These traditions revolve

around nature and its beings with a set of unique rituals. Eventually with the advent of Christian missionaries in the state these traditions were looked as superstitious and foolish and related to illiteracy. Kire provides us an outlook of these belief systems and the importance it holds on the lives of Nagas which is scattered throughout the novel through conversations among the characters like;

“If you break the taboos, you break yourself.” (Sky Is My Father, 14) and

“If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is.” (Sky Is My Father, 50)

This strict observation of customs and beliefs were to an extent responsible for their history of 22 raids in the most brutal Battle of Khonoma. The duty of revenge-taking also lies in their custom and it becomes the responsibility of not only the specific family whose member is killed but to the community. The evidence can be seen in the novel as;

“A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it. We have a name for such men – “thenumia”, women.” (Sky Is My Father, 8)

Other traditions such as killing of the tiger find its mention in the novel, creating their identity of inhuman and barbarianism. But for the Nagas, this ritual holds an extreme importance as

“Male children were encouraged to thrust their spears at different parts of the tiger’s body so that their fear of the tiger would be diminished and their hearts strengthened.” (Sky Is My Father, 15)

War

The whole narration of Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered comes to the conflict of the warrior village with the British, and their struggle during and after the war referred to as The Battle of Khonoma. It all started in 1832, with the first expedition to the Naga Hills was led by Captain Jenkins and Captain Pemberton with the purpose to find a route from Manipur to Assam via Naga country. The fiercest resistance was recorded from these hills from the moment to their entry till 1880. In the novel Kire presents the reality, ‘the other perspective’ of the battle.

“...22 raids between 1850-1865, 232 British subjects killed, wounded or taken prisoner! I have had enough reports of the audacity of Khonoma.”..... “If we crush this village, the others will have second thoughts about an uprising.” (Sky Is My Father, 84)

The resistance was taken as a challenge by the British and they took all possible measures to crush the clan by imposing heavy taxations resulting in violence if refused. The tension grew between the two resulting in number of raids, burning of houses, killing and imprisoning both sides of men. The British army was brutal to them and added on it was the army of Maharaja, who sent 2000 men adding on to the struggle. The number of clashes also led to the killing of an officer in 1879 resulting in more violent siege upon the tiny village. But despite being outnumbered and ill- equipped, Khonoma held the army for four long months eventually leading to the peace treaty on 27th March 1880. Though there was peace, the warrior clan also remembered the brutal act of violence done by the army.

“This was the fourth time that Khonoma had been burnt. Levi remembered the third burning. Houses of the Mehru clan were burnt as a lesson for the killing of Bogchand.” (Sky Is My Father, 108)

This radical change was not only external but internal as well, the advent of British follows the entrance of Christian missionaries, who eventually influenced the native to convert into Christianity. Religion underwent a change, natives gradually began learning English. The new religion received immense hatred as it began to strike at the old- traditional ways of the natives, resulting in a clash between the ideologies of those who followed the new religion and those of old religion.

“...but you were my son and now you have made our enemy your father. The white man killed your grandfather’s brother and burnt your grandfather’s house four times. Do you hear me, Sato, four times! You will have the blood of your ancestors on your hands.” (Sky Is My Father, 127)

Conclusion

Through her books Kire gives the importance to memory- writing suggesting that the oral narrative is a big reminder how fragile is memory as a resource. It is time bound treasure if not harvested, this potential of gathering history can be lost and with it goes the meta- narrative of the natives of the North- East. Kire provides us glimpses of Kohima of the wars by recreating a Nagaland which is lost in time and only find its existence down in memory lane. Memory- writing shape the contemporary generations understanding and provides them with experiences of the older generations giving a totally different view. Kire indirectly conveys us the integrity in oral narratives, even if the geography is scattered it does not scatter the roots as the stories remains in the minds and continue its narration down the ages.

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