



STORIES AS HOPE: RETELLING OF NAGA FOLKTALE AND MYTH IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *SON OF THE THUNDERCLOUD*

¹ C. Keren Vinita, ² Dr. Sushil Mary Mathews

¹ Ph. D scholar, ² Associate Professor and Head

¹Department of English,

¹ PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, India

Abstract: Naga Folktales and myths have reemerged as folk literature in recent times by collective efforts of Naga writers to preserve them from the memories of the older generation for posterity. The British rule in Nagaland and the consecutive wars had created a dearth in the transmission of oral tradition. The paper focuses on the importance of stories and storytelling and their bearing on the lives of children with reference to Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*. This paper seeks to analyze the retelling of the Mao myth of the primeval mother, *Dziilimosiuro* as a psychological defense mechanism of Naga people of their culture, values and nativized Christianity. It also throws light on the bearings of the folk narrative on the current Naga situation.

Index Terms - Naga culture, Folktale, storytelling, defense mechanism.

The term 'folklore' comprises the traditions, beliefs, myths, folktales, legends, and customs of the people and its main motif is 'saying a story.' Folklore has been transformed into 'folk literature' with the necessity to preserve it from oblivion in the form of print replacing its crudeness with sophistication and polish. Folktales are birthed in the universal desire to listen to stories. Of the nature of folktales, Bhaskar Roy Barman writes, "[T]hey enlighten us on the human imagination in its childhood; the attempts of our ancestors to dress their understanding of the world, their ideas and their beliefs, their customs and manner of living, in the garb of memorable narrative" (250). The symbols in folktale are nothing but images of dreams that are projected from the unconscious desires, fears, and morals of the people.

Naga Folktales and myths have re-emerged as folk literature in recent times by collective efforts of Naga writers to preserve them from the memories of the older generation for posterity. Easterine Kire, the first English writer from Nagaland, incorporates the Mao Naga myth of the primeval mother called *Dziilimosiuro* in her novel *Son of the Thundercloud*. *Dziilimosiuro* means 'crystal clear water'. *Dziilimosiuro* is believed to have been impregnated by a few drops of rain and gave birth to three sons: Spirit, Tiger, and Man. Spirit represents the supernatural realm and while Tiger and Man represent the animal kingdom and thus the three are believed to be brothers by the Nagas. However, the Tiger secretly wishing to eat the mother made her feel sick and anxious and the Spirit caused fear in her but the presence of Man comforted her because he took care of her. A dispute broke out between the brothers as to who will inherit the lands. A contest was devised where the first person to touch the ball of grass located in the center of the earth would be considered the winner. The mother understanding that Man cannot stand against the powers of Spirit and Tiger asked him to use a bow and arrow to shoot at the ball of grass. Man obeyed his mother eventually inheriting the earth. Spirit disappeared into the south of the earth while the tiger moved into the thick jungles.

The novel *Son of the Thundercloud* deals with the journey of Pele who escapes the famine that destroyed his village in search of the village of weavers where there was enough food and water. On the way he meets two strange women Kethonuo and Siedze living in a desolate village; they tell him that they had been waiting for rain for four hundred years. The coming of rain would signify the fulfillment of the prophecy of the birth of the son of the thundercloud. When Pele stays with the women in the village there is a heavy rain that replenishes the drylands with grains, trees, and rivers. The two women lead Pele to meet their sister Mesanuo in the Village of weavers. Mesanuo will beget the Son of the thundercloud named Rhalietuo. On meeting them Mesanuo tells them that she has been impregnated by a single drop of rain. Easterine Kire delineates Mesanuo after the original earth mother *Dzülimosiuro*: "Like her name, which meant 'the pure one', she exuded a purity of spirit . . ." (37). Pele realizes that Mesanuo is the tiger widow whose story his grandmother had narrated to him in his childhood. She had told him that it had happened long ago and that it would happen again in his lifetime. Mesanuo is called as the tiger widow by the villagers because her husband and seven sons were killed by the tiger. Kire weaves the story of Rhalietuo within the story of Pele whose journey through the villages ushers in rain fulfilling the prophecy.

Stories cause projection, identification, empathy, imitation, and imagination in children thereby nurturing their thoughts, emotions, actions, and behaviour leading to the formation of their selves. Children identify themselves with the characters in the stories that are told to them as they try to emulate them and they become a part of the story. In the novel, Rhalietuo internalizes every story that his mother narrates and he "dreamed of doing brave and wonderful things like the heroes in his mother's stories" (Kire 70). When Mesanuo narrates the story of the tiger killing her husband and her sons, Rhalietuo dreamt of killing the tiger that night. Rhalietuo therefore projects, imitates, identifies, and imagines himself as different characters in the story and desires to live such a life. His dream is realised when he kills the spirit tiger avenging his family's deaths and is hailed as the hero by the villagers. Even Pele finds himself a part of the story of the tiger widow.

Kire emphasizes the importance of storytelling and its impact on people using famine as a metaphor. Mesanuo attributes the drought and famine in the villages to the rejection, disbelief, and absence of stories and myths. She says, "So long as the storytellers were alive, there was hope and compassion in people's hearts, and their minds received and accepted that. But when the storytellers were killed . . . people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness" (Kire 64). Considering folktales to reveal the problems of the society which in this case is Nagaland, the killing of storytellers by the dark ones is compared to the censorship of particular stories and particular writers preventing them to tell their experiences and truth fearing that people would become "free of fear, free of shame and constant desire" thus curtailing their freedom (63). Sneha Khaund states that writing from North-East India does not find equal representation in the literary circle and academics due to "structural exclusion." The death of storytellers could also refer to the banning of *morungs* by the British administration and missionaries. *Morungs* were an integral part of the Naga community where young boys were initiated as men and the elders boosted their morale and identity with traditional stories and stories of war. It provided them with a sense of belonging and its absence has led to a sense of loss of identity in the younger generations.

Folktales play a decisive role in children's social and emotional development to relate with the world around them and formulate their cultural identity. It helps them to know, understand and assimilate their identity with their cultural traditions and heritage. Children imbibe the cultural values, beliefs, and wisdom of their people. This identity depends entirely on the community's socialization and interaction with the child through their folklore. The necessary component of a folktale is the ordeal and suffering that the hero undergoes. The folk heroic character has to face loss, suffering, overcome obstacles, fight against odds, and be vindicated or rewarded for his deeds. According to Ekaterina Stavrou, "The ordeal emerges as a functional, dynamic, and anthropomorphic expression of a complex semantic structure that includes both negative and positive aspects" (530). Confronting hardships in life is a universal part of the human experience. It is only with courage, wisdom, and faith in oneself and others can a person emerge victorious over one's trials. Children learn to accept this reality, cultivate ideals and values, and secure their identity by facing the imaginary dangers, monsters, villains, and the evil in the tale which eventually helps them to mature into adults who are strong both emotionally and psychologically.

The transformation of Rhalietuo from the Promised child to a Redeemer is fraught with obstacles. The headman and the other people shunned Mesanuo the tiger widow until Rhalietuo was born. The miracle interested them and the rejuvenation of the land with abundant food and harvest made them revere Mesanuo and offer their gifts and courtesies to her. Having a strong urge to visit her sisters in their village, Mesanuo, Pele and Rhalietuo take an arduous journey through the hills. Spirits in the form of a storm impede their journey to meet the sisters who had dreamed of Rhalietuo's destiny to kill the tiger. Mesanuo does not give up but prevails through the storm. She says, "Life is hard and unexpected, but we can direct it to go the way we want it to. It is up to us" (Kire 92). However, the villagers turn hostile towards her and her son by disregarding the prophecy and believing the tiger to be their protector. Overcome by jealousy and hatred Viphru, the headman's son deceives other boys into killing Rhalietuo during the community hunt. Kethonuo warns her sister Mesanuo earlier about the fate of Rhalietuo. She says, "Even if they see the goodness of his heart, it will only cause greater envy. Many will admire him, but they will fail to love him. . . . It has always been this way. It is the dark side of humanity" (86).

Children also learn life values of truth, hope, love, and humanity from folktales that teach them moral behaviour, the right attitude towards life, and conflict between good and evil. When Rhalietuo fears separation from his aunts, Kethonuo and Siedze their names meaning "Truth" and "Future full of hope" respectively (Kire 34). They assure him saying that love and life are stronger than death and that they are eternal. Pele as an archetype of Naga hero bridges the old world and the new world by staying 'faithful' to the beliefs and reaping bountiful lessons of faith, hope, and love to help him on the rest of his journey.

The changing status of society finds its reflections in the adaptations of its folktales. The nativization of Christianity into traditional legends of Nagaland is evident where Kire uses the Christ archetype in the character of Rhalietuo. The prophecies concerning the killing of the storytellers, the birth of Rhalietuo or the Son of the thundercloud correspond to the killing of the prophets and the birth of Christ as mentioned in the Bible respectively. The headman recollects, "A virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and he will save his people. Signs and wonders shall accompany his birth, and the land shall be rejuvenated" (41). The folktale tells the young readers about the amalgamation of the old religion, animism with the new religion Christianity. Shimreichon Luithui states that animism is "the belief in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting the natural world" (10). Nagas attributed spiritual existence to every element in the natural world including the trees, stones, water bodies, animals, and many more and they are pacified through rituals and sacrifices. The tiger that Rhalietuo kills is a spirit tiger, a mysterious phenomenon well known to the Nagas and Rhalietuo was able to kill it with a special spear and only because his "heart was pure" and not seeking pride (Kire 84).

The retelling of the folk narrative serves to be a defense mechanism reflective of the Naga society in Kire's writing. It arises from the social tensions and anxieties caused by several decades of internal conflict in the region. Rhalietuo being killed by his own people reflects the fight between the factions in Nagaland. Kire presents the defense mechanism of sublimation to cope with the fear of living among the enemies, to steer the negative outcomes into a healthy stance. Instead of avenging the death of her son, Mesanuo and Pele leave the village to come to the abandoned village that they name *Nouzie*, meaning compassion. Even Rhalietuo, though he was ill-treated and hated by the villagers he still loved them and protected them. Kire wishes her young readers to come to the place of compassion. A child could learn from the narrative to accept, love, and care for others wholeheartedly even if death separates them. Tales such as the *Son of the Thundercloud* help children to eradicate feelings of loneliness to which they are vulnerable making them live out their destiny knowing that they belong to their community and that they are loved.

Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* has metamorphosed into folk literature carrying the characteristics of a folktale. As a redefined folktale it introduces a child to the culture of the Angami Nagas and sows in virtues of love, hope, and belief in the miraculous and goodness of humanity; to make meaning of the world through the symbolic activities of the mind and reflection of the self and thus acting as a catalyst in the socio-emotional development of the child. The novel conveys to the child and adult alike the rich heritage of universal values, wisdom, and symbols through Naga folktale and myth.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barman, Bhaskar Roy. "Folklore as a genre." *Canons of Children's Literature*, vol.1, edited by Sunita Sinha, Atlantic, 2012, pp. 249-265.
- [2] Khaund, Sneha. "Systemic erasure: Why writing from North-East India doesn't make it to lists of 'Indian' books." *Scroll.in*, 23 Aug. 2020, scroll.in/article/971069/systemic-erasure-why-writing-from-the-north-east-doesnt-make-it-to-lists-of-indian-books.
- [3] Kire, Easterine. *Son of the Thundercloud*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.
- [4] Luithui, Shimreichon. "Naga: A People Struggling for Self Determination." *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*, 2001, www.iwgia.org/en/resources/publications/306-briefings/2660-naga-a-people-struggling-for-self-determination.html.
- [5] Stavrou, Ekaterina. "Determining the Cultural Identity of a Child through Folk Literature." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 3, no. 4, Jan. 2015, pp. 527-534. *ResearchGate*, <https://doi.org/10.12691/education-3-4-20>.

