
Resonating Echoes: Easterine Kire's Literary Odes to Naga Culture and Social Consciousness

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Abstract

Easterine Kire holds a revered and significant position within the literary landscape of Nagaland, standing out for her exceptional talent in intricately portraying the socio-cultural life of the Naga people. Her contributions to Naga literature are particularly noteworthy as she pioneers the exploration and revitalization of the rich Naga oral traditions, encompassing folklore and the wisdom passed down through ancestral communities. Through her novels, including *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *"Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), Kire weaves narratives that resonate with the sensitive and authentic voices of Nagaland's tribal populations.

What distinguishes Easterine Kire is her profound social consciousness and her ability to create a vivid cultural tapestry that immerses readers in the authentic lives of the Naga people. Notably, Kire draws from her personal perspective, supplemented by historical documents from Naga society, to craft her narratives. This distinctive approach not only provides valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of the Naga people but also serves to preserve and celebrate their unique traditions. Kire's fictional works emerge as a significant means to comprehend the intricacies and subtleties of Naga society, shedding light on their cultural heritage, social dynamics, and the challenges they confront.

Easterine Kire's literary contribution is a testament to the power of literature in safeguarding and promoting the diverse tapestry of indigenous cultures. Her work invites readers to deeply engage with and appreciate the multifaceted world of the Naga people. Through her narratives, Kire successfully bridges the gap between the Naga community and a broader readership, fostering understanding and appreciation for the rich cultural heritage embedded in their stories. Kire emerges not only as a literary figure but also as a cultural ambassador, preserving, and disseminating the essence of Naga traditions through the medium of literature.

Keywords: social consciousness, historical narratives, traditions, cultural dynamics, challenges of women, indigenous people etc.

Introduction

The claim that history functions as a social and cultural artifact that encompasses the authentic experiences of individuals and offers a deep comprehension of both people and their territory remains valid in the field of literary studies, especially when analysing the writings of Easterine Kire. Kire's novels provide genuine accounts of historical events, delivered with a compassionate approach.

Kire's narrative strategy relies on genuine storytelling, and for her, this approach is not only a preference but an essential requirement. Her works serve as an authentic record of the Naga history, guaranteeing the precise and respectful preservation of her people's past. Kire's dedication to utilizing authentic historical sources enables her to revive documents that provide invaluable perspectives on the Nagas' experiences.

Kire's utilization of authentic historical events not only appeals to the Naga community but also reaches a wider range of readers. Her works provide a valuable and illuminating reading experience for non-Naga readers who desire a more profound comprehension of Naga society and history. The authenticity of her narratives is further enhanced by her personal connection to the context and her firsthand experiences as a "native individual." As Kire aptly acknowledges, "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). In this way, her literary works become a bridge that connects readers, both within and beyond the Naga community, to a more profound comprehension of Naga history, culture, and society.

Easterine Kire, a member of the Indo-Mongoloid tribal community known as the Nagas, has become a notable figure in discussing the historical and cultural obstacles that the Naga culture encounters through her fictional stories. As a writer from the Naga tribe, she presents an authentic and accurate depiction of her community's experiences, serving as an essential platform for their unheard stories. Kire's stories are widely adopted as mirrors of the people's own narratives, as she astutely acknowledges the significance of personal storytelling as a method of healing, particularly among a community whose stories are characterized by profound anguish and awe.

In Easterine Kire's debut novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, she embarks on a literary exploration of the socio-cultural customs and courageous actions of the warrior village of Khonoma. The novel provides a historical portrayal of this genuine village community, where ordinary individuals actively engage in the everyday activities of life. Through Kire's lens, the reader is offered a vivid and authentic glimpse into the intricacies of Khonoma's social fabric, capturing the nuances of customs, rituals, and the collective spirit that defines the village. The narrative not only serves as a historical documentation but also as a celebration of the ordinary lives that contribute to the rich tapestry of Naga culture.

On the other hand, *A Terrible Matriarchy* takes the form of a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age novel, that follows the transformative journey of a young female protagonist named 'Dielieno.' The narrative unfolds as Dielieno grapples with and confronts the patriarchal conventions embedded within her tribal identity. Throughout the novel, Kire delves into the personal development, emotions, and encounters of Dielieno as she navigates the challenges imposed by traditional gender norms. The term "matriarchy" in the title suggests a thematic exploration of power dynamics within a female-dominated social structure, providing a unique perspective on gender roles within the Naga context. As the bildungsroman progresses, readers witness Dielieno's evolution, her struggles, and triumphs against societal expectations. The novel becomes a platform for exploring the complexities of identity, womanhood, and the dynamics of power within a Naga community. Kire's narrative style not only captures the external challenges faced by the protagonist but also delves into her internal struggles, emotions, and the broader socio-cultural context that shapes her journey.

A Naga Village Remembered and *A Terrible Matriarchy* exemplify Easterine Kire's ability to intricately portray the historical and cultural dimensions of Naga life. Through these novels, Kire not only contributes to the literary landscape but also sheds light on the multifaceted aspects of Naga identity, from the collective experiences of a village community to the individual struggles and growth of a young woman confronting entrenched gender norms.

Life on Hold explores the perspectives of those trapped in the midst of the conflict between the Indian State and the Naga Ethnic Insurgency organization, providing insight into the intricacies of this era. *Bitter Wormwood* delves into a Naga community plagued by rebellion, depicting the upheaval and difficulties experienced by its inhabitants. When the River Sleeps tells a captivating story that explores tribal identity, rituals, beliefs, and the profound respect for the earth and tight-knit communities. Easterine Kire's novels thus provide a distinctive narrative perspective aimed at establishing the true identity of the Naga people. The character drawings in each piece exemplify the quintessential nature and essence of the Naga people. Kire's fictional tales categorize the discussions on Naga socio-cultural factors into the following divisions:

Traditional Relationships

The indigenous societies of Nagaland place great value on family ties as crucial components for integration, and Easterine Kire's novels effectively portray the importance of these relationships. The family unit holds intrinsic importance within Naga cultures, acting as a fundamental pillar of their social structure. In Nagaland, the family is not merely a collection of individuals but is intricately woven into the broader social structure. The family unit is regarded with intrinsic importance, serving as a foundational pillar that contributes to the stability and continuity of Naga cultures. The familial relationships extend beyond the nuclear family, encompassing extended family members and even the larger clan or tribal affiliations.

Kire's novels effectively portray the importance of these familial relationships by delving into the dynamics, interactions, and interdependence among family members. The narratives often showcase how familial bonds serve as sources of support, guidance, and strength for individuals navigating the complexities of life in Nagaland. Whether in times of celebration or adversity, the family emerges as a constant source of emotional and social sustenance.

Moreover, the novels shed light on how family ties contribute to the broader theme of integration within Naga societies. The interconnectedness of families creates a web of relationships that extends throughout the community, fostering a sense of unity and shared identity. The family unit, therefore, becomes a microcosm of the larger social fabric, reflecting the values, traditions, and cultural ethos that define Nagaland. Easterine Kire's portrayal of family ties in her novels underscores the foundational role of the family unit within Naga cultures. The emphasis on family relationships serves not only to depict the intricate social dynamics of Nagaland but also to highlight the enduring importance of these ties in shaping the individual, maintaining cultural continuity, and contributing to the overall integration of indigenous societies in Nagaland.

Siezo assumes an important role, similar to that of a parent, in the lives of Levi and Lato in the book *A Naga Village Remembered*. Due to the early loss of their biological father, Siezo instinctively assumes the role of a paternal figure. In addition to addressing their actual needs through roof repairs, he also fosters cherished experiences by accompanying them to the river for winter bird traps.

This depiction highlights the robust familial connections and reciprocal assistance that are widespread among Naga households, wherein individuals readily assume various tasks and obligations as required.

A Terrible Matriarchy explores the concept of communal responsibility and solidarity within extended Naga families. When older relatives need help, the larger family comes together to offer aid. Dielieno, the main character, willingly aids Neikuo when she becomes ill, and the grandmother benefits from a group of individuals who support her in doing her daily tasks. Family members gather during important life occasions, such as weddings and funerals, where relatives join together to perform ceremonies and provide mutual assistance. This collaborative approach emphasizes the concept that in Naga society, all activities are undertaken collectively, and individuals support each other during times of necessity.

Vilau, a young widow in the novel *Bitter Wormwood*, serves as a prime example of the community dynamics within Naga families. Although she is diligent, cultivating the fields single-handedly can be arduous, prompting her to frequently seek assistance from her in-laws and male relatives. The eagerness to help and distribute duties highlights the feeling of unity and mutual reliance among Naga households.

Life on Hold is a careful portrayal of patriarchal customs, in which the eldest son, Zeu, assumes the family's obligations upon his father's death. Despite receiving an appealing offer of marriage, Zeu decides to remain single, devoting his life to settling his father's financial obligations. Zeu's character strongly identifies with Kire's assertion in *A Terrible Matriarchy* that one must occasionally relinquish cherished possessions in order to maintain familial harmony. He acknowledges the significance of his father's financial obligations and is resolute in avoiding imposing the same encumbrance on his prospective offspring, thus illustrating the selfless essence of familial duty in Naga culture. Easterine Kire's novels accurately portray the profound familial connections and shared obligation that are essential to the structure of Naga society, underscoring the importance of family relationships as a key unifying element in tribal groups.

The Naga civilization exhibits a social structure that is patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal, with lineage being traced through the father's side. Within this context, the father assumes a pivotal role as the patriarch of the family and bears the responsibility of ensuring the family's sustenance and upholding its social status and collective identity. Easterine Kire's novels offer perceptive insights into the manifestation of these social norms and behaviors within Naga society.

In the book *A Naga Village Remembered*, the main character, Kovi, demonstrates the obligations associated with fatherhood within a patriarchal society. Upon his pregnant wife's illness, Kovi assumes the role of a conscientious parent. Although he first believed that childbirth is primarily the responsibility of women, he patiently awaits the naming ceremony for his child. Upon the child's birth, Kovi conducts a momentous gesture by applying saliva to his finger and gently putting it to his son's forehead, while uttering the word "first." This action symbolizes the child's paternity and carries cultural importance within the Naga community. This highlights the significance of birth in determining one's identity and emphasizes the recurring cultural practice of family members claiming and naming newborns as a means of identifying them as members of a certain clan.

The importance of naming in Naga society is further highlighted in *Bitter Wormwood*.

The midwife recommends that Vilau, a young widow and mother of a newborn son, urgently consider a name for her child. Following this advice is not merely a matter of convenience; it carries significant cultural ramifications. Naming serves as a means to ensure the child's distinctiveness within the clan community and to shield them from malicious supernatural entities. In Naga society, there is a belief that names have a strong influence on the fate of individuals, making the selection of a name a matter of great importance. Grandmother Khrienuo chose the name "Moselie," which signifies someone who will approach life without deceit, to convey both a wish for a favorable future and the expectation that the child will always have good intentions towards people. This illustrates the complex interaction between culture, identity, and patriarchal norms in Naga society, where naming customs are imbued with profound meaning and importance.

The clan plays a pivotal and powerful part in the social structure of Naga culture, and its importance is vividly depicted in Easterine Kire's storytelling. Within Naga culture, individuals belonging to the same clan own a shared clan name in addition to their personal names, which serves to cultivate robust connections and a unified sense of identity. The clan relationships serve as both a cultural foundation and influence multiple facets of life within the community. Clan members collaborate in many endeavours, such as the establishment of village infrastructure, residences for clan members, and dormitories for different age cohorts. Cooperative assistance is apparent during important life occasions, such as the weddings or funerals of clan members. In times of conflict, clans come together and distribute tasks, highlighting the collective power and unity within the clan.

The elders of the clan hold the power and authority, and are commonly known as the guardians of the land's laws. Within Kire's tales, the clan elders fulfill the roles of decision-makers and instigators of significant rites. It is incumbent upon them to provide guidance and knowledge to younger folks regarding the customs and principles of their community. In the book "A Naga Village Remembered," the elders play a crucial role in guiding Vilau throughout the five-day ceremony, imparting him with vital skills and knowledge. Khrienuo's decision to bequeath her house to her grandson in Bitter Wormwood is motivated by the counsel of clan elders. This legislation is based on the recognition that older individuals have a crucial role in resolving issues pertaining to family assets, inherited land, and agricultural areas.

Elders serve as guardians of traditional rules and community governance. They ensure that these rules are enforced and implemented in accordance with established norms. The book *Mari* provides a succinct portrayal of how the village council, led by elders, enforces settlement laws, specifically in relation to the registration of Mari's children in accordance with customary practices. This guarantees the children's entitlement to establish permanent residence in their native area and exercise property ownership if they opt to do so. Therefore, the clan relationships play a fundamental role in Naga culture, and the authority of clan elders is of utmost importance in several aspects such as ceremonies, traditions, property, and governance.

Easterine Kire's accounts emphasize the significant influence exerted by clans and their elders on the social, cultural, and legal dimensions of Naga life, offering readers a more profound comprehension of the complex dynamics inside the culture. Marriage in Naga society is considered a socially sanctioned and acknowledged partnership between a mature man and a mature woman.

Easterine Kire's novels offer excellent understanding of the traditions and importance of marriage in this cultural setting.

In the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the grandmother offers a profound interpretation of marriage as "the intermingling of familial bloodlines." This description corresponds to the Naga exogamous system, which promotes the practice of marrying persons from beyond one's own family groups. Exogamy is a common custom in Naga communities, which encourages diversity and wider social relationships. Marriage among the Nagas has important societal responsibilities including family hierarchy and the perpetuation of the lineage. It is not simply a connection between two persons, but rather a familial event encompassing other ceremonial practices. Kire's writings provide a captivating insight into the complexities of Naga wedding rituals.

The protagonist Levi's marriage in the book *A Naga Village Remembered* serves as a powerful illustration of the procedures followed throughout these weddings. The marriage proposal is conveyed to the youngster by a female relative, such as Levi's paternal aunt Niseno, who visits him with a proposition of matrimony. Levi meticulously evaluates the proposition, imagining himself as a homeowner and landowner, much like his father, with numerous offspring to continue his legacy. Upon his consent, his aunt assumes the responsibility of presenting the proposal to the girl's family, adhering to the traditional practice in Naga society.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the marriage proposal is communicated to the girl's family through a female relative of the boy. During Vini's marriage, the grandmother plays a proactive role in arranging the union with Nisano's family, highlighting the significance of the inheritance that Vini will inherit. The negotiating process highlights the familial and community elements of Naga weddings, wherein the concerns and social standing of both families are taken into account.

Naga society upholds personal autonomy in matters of marital choices. An individual of the female gender possesses the entitlement to either accept or decline a proposition, yet the impact of familial influence can be substantial. *Life on Hold* depicts an intricate marital situation where Nime is presented with a marriage proposal from Abeiu's family. The idea of marrying a man who is thirteen years older and whom she does not love is causing her distress. Nevertheless, Zeu, her brother who is cognizant of their family's considerable financial obligations, strongly urges her to contemplate the marriage as a means of preserving their family's standing in society. These examples illustrate the complex and diverse nature of Naga marriages, in which personal preferences and decisions are considered in relation to familial and cultural norms. Easterine Kire's books provide a detailed examination of marriage as a key institution in Naga society, illustrating the complex interaction between tradition, duty, and individual autonomy within this framework.

Friendship has a crucial role in the social structure of human life, and Easterine Kire's novels illuminate the deep importance of friendship in tribal communities, where it is regarded as the most elevated form of social interaction and is anticipated to last a lifetime. Within Naga societies, commitments to friendship are rigorously upheld, with the expectation that these friendships will endure indefinitely. Villages actively pursue friendships and alliances with nearby villages, acknowledging that these connections promote peace and facilitate individuals' acquisition and adherence to societal standards through interactions with close companions.

A Naga Village Remembered highlights the significance of village alliance bonds, wherein locals unite to protect the reputation and interests of their respective villages. This notion epitomizes the communal essence of friendship in Naga culture, wherein entire communities come together to guarantee their welfare. Both *Life on Hold* and *A Terrible Matriarchy* delve into the issue of childhood friendship, underscoring the crucial significance of companionship in the lives of social individuals. These novels portray friendship as vital components of individual growth and societal inclusion. The protagonists' encounters with their intimate companions influence their comprehension of societal conventions and principles.

Kire's portrayal of tribal characteristics prominently focuses on the theme of camaraderie. In *Bitter Wormwood*, friends are depicted as dependable providers of assistance and encouragement in all circumstances. The friendship between Mose and Neituo is emphasized as a robust and long-lasting connection. During their childhood, they each attend school separately, and their distinct qualities enhance one another. Their friendship exemplifies the cohesion that may arise from embracing variety.

Upon joining the Naga Underground warriors to advocate for the liberation of Nagaland, Mose and Neituo's camaraderie deepens significantly. Notwithstanding the demanding and difficult circumstances of their newfound existence, they derive resilience from the companionship they provide to one another. Their mutual conviction in the pursuit of an independent Nagaland sustains their morale. Nevertheless, Neituo is profoundly affected by Mose's abrupt demise. Kire adeptly depicts the profoundness of their connection as Neituo remains steadfastly by Mose's still corpse, steadfastly refusing to depart. This significant moment represents the lasting value of genuine friendship, which surpasses the constraints of time and situation.

Easterine Kire's works elucidate the fundamental importance of friendship in Naga society, emphasizing its significance in individual growth, communal unity, and the endeavour towards shared objectives. Friendship is shown as a potent and enduring influence that unites persons and profoundly influences their lives.

The essence of Naga society is in its communal way of living, and Easterine Kire's works offer deep understanding of the collective aspect of their existence. Within Naga culture, individual interests are deemed inconsequential, as the activities and pursuits of individuals are motivated by the welfare and concerns of the community as a collective entity. The community orientation is deeply rooted, and the pursuit of collective objectives and principles prevents individuals from experiencing detachment from their acts or from society as a whole.

A settlement inhabited by the Naga people. *Remembered* powerfully depicts the community lifestyle by focusing on Kovi, an elder in the village whose life is closely connected to the hamlet's activities. Kire depicts Kovi's strong sense of satisfaction in diligently studying women as they bring back firewood, a crucial asset for the village, during the early morning hours. This portrayal provides a brief insight into the daily existence of the hamlet, where collective duties and obligations are distributed among its inhabitants.

Easterine Kire's narratives foster communal bonds by including the wisdom of esteemed elders, who act as moral mentors within the community. The older generation plays a vital role in transmitting the principles and customs of collective existence to the younger cohort.

At Kichuki, a location dedicated to the education of young men in practical skills, art, and oral history, the elders consistently provide guidance to Levi and his peers on appropriate conduct and successful integration within the community. The focus on community values highlights the significance of collective togetherness in Naga society.

Kire further examines the importance of communal existence in *Bitter Wormwood*. Mose, a revered senior, epitomizes the principles of the community. He fulfils the role of a sage and advisor for both his peers and young men, specifically in regards to land and clan conflicts. Mose's role as a freedom warrior exemplifies his unwavering dedication to the community's endeavour to safeguard their inherited territories from external influences. Mari explores the communal experience throughout World War II and the Japanese incursion into Nagaland. Kire expresses gratitude towards the oral narrators who have safeguarded the legends of this epochal era. The narrative underscores the war's transformative impact on the community's history, restructuring their lives and accentuating the interdependence of their encounters.

In Kire's storytelling, community encouragement and solidarity are of utmost importance. Collaboratively constructing homes, pooling resources, and providing mutual assistance are essential components of communal existence. The well-being of the community is intricately linked to the interpersonal connections among its constituents, cultivating a sentiment of reliance, collaboration, and selflessness that transcends personal gain to enhance the collective societal structure. Kire's portrayal highlights the Naga community's prominent and dominant position, showcasing their commitment to togetherness and interdependence, which are fundamental to their lifestyle.

Conclusion

The integration of historical context into literary studies, together with a proactive involvement with the past while being mindful of present-day issues, is an important contribution to the examination of cultural identity. This technique provides the chance to discover and address important themes, whether they are related to historical stories or political disputes, therefore enhancing our comprehension and contributing to the maintenance of the current societal structure. (Barry 1995)

Easterine Kire's fictional narratives are notable for their instructional and informative nature in this particular context. Her narratives function as a means of political involvement, as they strive to regain, reassess, redefine, and protect the culture and history of the Naga community from being misrepresented. Kire's work is distinguished by its impartiality and meticulous analysis of the societal, political, economic, and cultural factors that influence indigenous communities. Kire's primary objective is to enhance the strength and influence of her community. She achieves this by establishing a medium for individuals to gain self-confidence and by transforming the conversation surrounding Naga culture and history. Her narratives provide a crucial frame of reference for her community, imparting understanding, consciousness, and a feeling of empowerment in confronting the difficulties and intricacies they encounter.

Therefore. Easterine Kire's literary works epitomize the capacity of literature to actively involve with history, politics, and cultural identity, so empowering communities and reshaping their stories. The significance of authors and intellectuals who actively engage in shaping and safeguarding the cultural legacy and social structure of their communities is emphasized by her work.

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