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CULTURAL POLEMICS AS A RECURRING FACTOR IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *SKY IS MY FATHER: A NAGA VILLAGE REMEMBERED*

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Abstract:

Easterine Kire is one of the phenomenal writers of Naga literature, who echoes the culture bound traditions of Nagaland. Cultural polemics play a significant role in current era as it brings to light the changes which are wrought in terms of Globalisation. The indigenous practices get subdued under the cultural polemics played by the British people. The sudden shift of culture from one another makes the native people, a victim of cultural amalgamation. The hilly region which is bound with flora and fauna remains the safest place for Naga people until the advent of British troops. After the advent of British as mainstream power source, the entire people find it hard to cope with the transitions which happen in society in terms of modernisation. The religious connotations get transferred into new epithets with the arrival of British in Nagaland. The elderly people foresee the cultural disruption which in turn slowly poisons the young minds to enter into new culture. The traditional practices like *genna* days, chicken sacrifices and clan system get slowly disappear from the Naga culture. The ethnic conflict brings to light the introduction of new phenomenal culture replacing the vernacular culture of Nagaland. This paper attempts to analyse the turbulences which are responsible for the transition in Naga culture.

Keywords: cultural literacy, counterculture, mythos, indigenous practices, esoteric sayings

Easterine Kire is one of the north eastern writers, who present the authentic view of Naga culture throughout her works. She has contributed copious poems, short story collections and novels which display her affection towards the indigenous tribes of Nagaland. India is a cradle of different cultures. Each and every state has its own culture specific traditions which get slowly eroded under the canopy of modernisation. Kire brings out the cultural polemics which are responsible for the changes in present day Nagaland.

Kire gives the ecological background of the village Khonoma, in Nagaland. *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* is one of the first Naga novels written by Easterine Kire in English language. Nagaland is one of the North Eastern states, which is bordered by mountainous area. The mountainous area serves as a natural fortress of being isolated from other regions. The clan system is one of the predominant features of the Naga culture. There are multifarious clans like Semo, Thevo, Thepa and Merhu in Nagaland. Each clan has their own indigenous practices and customs which are unique in their own way.

The British expedition to the Naga Hills dates back to the year 1832. The original intention of the British is to find a route from Manipur to Assam through Nagaland. The entry of British troops in Nagaland altered the mainstream culture which is prevalent for ages. The entry of British culture has rendered the cultural practices which is predominant in clan system of Nagaland. The culturally literate Nagaland people, who are secluded from the tinges of modernisation, find British as a threat to their culture.

In the book *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory* Habib mentions that "It is evident that much of what falls under Cultural studies could easily be classified under various other labels such as Marxism, Structuralism, New Historicism, Feminism and Postcolonialism" (174). The primary motif of

Easterine Kire is to record the cultural anxieties which surround the Naga culture. The myth and taboos followed by the native people make them to live a moral life. The native people encounter new culture, which is totally different from the indigenous culture of their own. The proud warriors, who represented the various clans, remain feeble in front of the modern weapons brought out by the British government.

The native warriors of Nagaland used spear-wielded weapons; sharpened weapons made up of bamboos and rolled down rocks which could not stop the entry of British into their land. Levi feels sad for the warriors of Khonoma, who are known for their chivalry. He says that “could these be the proud warriors of Khonoma? Who could reduce them to this? He wondered, and he thought that the white men must indeed be very powerful if he could capture these men with hearts of stone who had battled with tigers and bears” (Kire 45). The native people were made to believe that they are inferior in comparison to the ruling party by means of advancement in technology. Lack of advancement in technology makes the indigenous people a victim of colonial rule.

The proletariat people find it hard to cope with the colonial rule brought out by the British people. The people of Nagaland lead an independent life with agriculture as their occupation. Their basic requirements like food and shelter are available to them in enormous quantity. With the advent of British in Nagaland, the occupation of the people gets slowly shifted to dependent jobs under British government.

Khonoma, the warrior village faces social ostracism for siding with the British rule. The Eurocentric perspective of the British made Naga people to get alienated from their own cultural practices and to adopt Christianity, the religion of west. The converted people are given a place outside the perimeter of the village. The socio-cultural conflicts within the country India enabled the foreigners to have easy access to mark their position as rulers in Nagaland. The different clans of Nagaland had difference of opinion within their own people. This made the British to have an easy access to gain their power in Nagaland.

The character Levi is a full-fledged manifestation of Naga culture. He is a proud warrior who represents the people of Nagaland. He bravely took his carrier as a warrior in the battle of Khonoma and opposed the British army. He spends years in jail for his refusal to yield under the British government. The interface of western culture makes him impatient and clueless. Levi’s son Roko opposes his brother Lato, when he joins in the school run by the English missionaries. He says that “Huh, you’re learning book but no one eats book. Someday you’ll wish you had learnt more of field work” (Kire 119). Roko does not support to the idea of being educated with hard skills. He wants his brother to get educated with basic survival skills which are essential for primitive life. Roko believes that being educated with hard skills does not help the person to satisfy his need for food.

The social mobility of Nagaland people from being rulers to being colonized creates a major transformation in the culture. The warriors of Garipheju were one of the powerful ones before the arrival of the British. The women of Garipheju, got involved themselves in weaving when the war took place with the Khonoma people. Kire says that “On the day of battle, the women of Garipheju were unperturbed by the news of approaching enemy warriors. They continued their weaving, confident that their men would protect them (Kire 4). The much powerful women of the Nagaland shifted their role as that of colonized in the hands of British people. The submission of Nagaland people leaves them to live a life of colonized in their native land.

The proud warriors of the village get transformed into normal people, looking after the family and their whereabouts after constant raids in the village by the British. The massive killing of warriors, made the native people to think of alternative ways to stop the British invasion. They remain submissive in front of the British people due to their powerful position in India. The power politics play a leading

role in transforming the native people. The communal strength of the clan gets exploited with the arrival of British forces.

The British people take their role as the bourgeoisie taking away the labour of the common people of Nagaland. The people of Nagaland serve as the proletariat by rendering their labour for livelihood under the British people. Though the land belongs to the different clans of Nagaland, the British people levy tax on the native people. British political agent named Damant levies revenue for the native people of Nagaland. This creates a stir upon the native people of Nagaland who are prone to be independent workers. Damant also threatens to use weapons in order to collect revenue from the people of Khonoma and Jotsoma.

The British with their powerful resources impart their own culture through cultural imperialism. The cultural imperialism has led to the fading of Angami culture. The Indian soldiers get enrolled under the British government wearing turbans. Native people like Zakiesielie works as translator for the white men. The independent people of Nagaland find refuge in the hands of British for daily wages.

The cultural archetypes which travel from one generation to another get hindered by the entry of new culture. The young people of the village of Khonoma become ignorant of the cultural practices which are followed by generations. Levi, who returns after spending years in jail, is shocked to see the cultural practices being neglected by the younger generation. He finds out that there are no more *genna* days, chicken practices in the community. The young people find no time to greet the elders, who pass through the streets.

Language takes integral role in promoting the cultural aspects of a culture. Nagaland has various ethnic groups, which have their own language and cultural values. With the entry of new culture Multilingualism takes its own place in the region. Riverburg is one of the British personnel, who is engaged in teaching students. At first Riverburg's classes starts with Angami language, which is the native language of the people of Khonoma. Later on it gets developed into talking classes, where Sato along with his classmates are encouraged to converse in English. The English people intentionally bring their culture into Nagaland, under the canopy of education.

The changing mind-set of younger generation is brought through the character Sato. Sato neglects the traditional ritual of Sekrenyi, the process of initiation in the indigenous Angami culture. Sato, after getting education from missionaries begins to neglect the native traditional practices. He loves to embrace Christianity as his religion, for which he fears his father.

The myths and traditions of Indigenous culture get newer meaning with the arrival of western culture. Esoteric sayings get neglected by the native people, under the concept of modernisation. The combinations of two cultures have resulted in cultural amalgamation. Sato becomes the victim of the rendered culture. He believes that the two religions are similar in their thoughts and philosophies. Sato gives new meaning to the cultural practices of Angami culture.

Now he no longer believed that the two religions were so diametrically opposed to each other. He thought of Isu on the cross as a chicken sacrifice much greater than the chicken sacrifices the Angamis had made. Isu was the chicken being sacrificed, for man to be free from disease, and all the ailments the spirits could bring upon him. The way Sato understood it – to be a follower of Isu- was to be bound by taboos similar to the old taboos, but by taboos that had meaning and, as in the old way, the breaking of taboos, old or new, would break oneself. How Sato wished that his father would come to see that the new religion was really a fulfilment of old- answering the questions that the old was struggling with, and giving meaning to the feasts, and to life as the village knew it and lived it.(Kire 122-123)

Sato is made to believe that his new adopted religion is not different from the other. The new counterculture has replaced the traditional culture of the Naga people. Sato interprets the process of

sanctification as the process of baptizing in church. New connotations get associated with the traditional culture which is prevalent for ages.

Levi leaves his son Sato to English school in order to learn the techniques adopted by British at times of war. But Sato adopts the religion and culture of the west. Levi gets disturbed by the fall of traditional culture of Nagaland. He is very much agitated and reminds his son of the constant raids which are done by the British army in Nagaland. Levi reminds his son that the British people are responsible for the death of his grandfather. The British with their powerful sources fail to understand the significance of the values associated with Angami tribe.

Identity crisis is one of the prominent features in the novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. Identity evolves with time and each and every character in the novel are in search of their identity in the war torn land. In *Key Concepts of Cultural Theory* the integral part of identity in cultural studies is summarized as,

The issue of identity is central to cultural studies, in so far as cultural studies examines the contexts within which and through which both individuals and groups construct, negotiate and defend their identity or self-understanding. Cultural studies draws heavily on those approaches to the problem of identity that question that may be called orthodox accounts of identity. (Edgar and Sedgwick¹²²)

The key character in the novel like Sato continues in his search for identity in the confused state of war. Though he belongs to the Angami tribe, he gets attracted to the teachings of the west. His constant turbulence makes him the victim of western practices. Levi and his people believe that Sato would become a warrior. But Sato goes against the wishes of his father Levi and his community. Sato is given due importance in the village due to his identity as the offspring of titled parents. When Sato adopts the practices of the west, he excludes himself from the village. The in-between state of Sato and the religious converts play an integral part in the novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*.

Easterine Kire brings to frontier the culture of Nagaland through her works. War is responsible for the entry of new culture in Nagaland. The social mobility of Nagas from rulers to being colonized makes tremendous changes in the culture of the region. The socio-political changes within country India paved way for the entry of new culture in Nagaland.

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