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History, Trauma and Resilience of the Nagas: A Reading of Easterine Kire's a Respectable Woman

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ABSTRACT

The impact of literary work on human society can never be underrated; it not only has a profound impact on the reader's life but percolates deep down influencing civilizationby mirroring the social, economic and cultural aspects of a society. The genres and sub-genres of novel over the years, despite numerous experimentations with style and form, have sought to depict the world with itscomplexities of social problems, everyday life and charactersdriven by their primal instincts and social conditions. Similarly, literature from the North East of India not only portrays the rich culture, verdant nature, the struggle between armed resistance and peace pacts but also showcases the history of the region.

Novels depicting historical events play an important role in both literature and culture. They bring the past to life by humanizing historical events, figures and culture weaving emotions, perspectives and lived experiences into historical contexts. These writers blend documentary history with fictional storytelling,thereby, allowing the readers to emotionally connect with events and people. At times when gaps occur due to lack of official facts, the writers fill them with imaginative reconstructions which accentuate the overall feel of the times. Harry E Shaw in his article "An Approach to Historical Novel", shares the historian Herbert Butterfield's opinion that historical novel "…attempts to 'reconstruct a world, to particularise, to catch a glimpse of human nature.' The task of the historical novelist is to render the unique 'atmosphere' of an age in the past, to 'recapture the fleeting moment'" (Shaw 25).

Writers, particularly novelists, from the North East of India, as like the rest of the world, have attempted to reconstruct the past in their literary work. Among the eminent writers of this region, Easterine Kire, who is a celebrated poet, novelist and short story writer from Nagaland,gives an insight into the culture, tradition and political aspects of the state of Nagaland, particularly that of Angami Naga community in her work.Her works reflect the fascinating and vibrant culture of the Nagas.Some of her prominent novels are A Terrible Matriarchy (2007), Mari (2010), Son of the thundercloud (2016), When the River Sleeps (2014), Don't Run, My Love (2018) andA Respectable Women (2019). Commenting on Kire and her work, Luis A Gomez in a newspaper article notes that "Kire delicately mixes live traditions with new standards. She then gives the Angami (and all of us) the chance to understand, to remember, to move forward while looking back to their ancestors' best. That's the gift" (National Herald 22 April 2018).

Easterine Kire, apart from highlighting the culture and beliefs of the Nagas, has also touched upon the horrendous World War II when Naga Hills was invaded by the Japanese. Historically, when World War II struck Naga Hills, it was under the control of the British Empire. The British missionaries had already made extensive contact with the Nagas and their influence had spread over the hills. Many Nagas by then had converted themselves to Christianity, slowing giving up their head hunting tradition. It was basically after the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese War in 1824 that the British gradually extended their control over the Naga inhabited areas. In 1881, they decided to make the Naga Hills a British District. The British had annexed this part of the country after designating the area as 'Naga Hills excluded area,' and the indigenous inhabitants were referred to as "subjects people Nagas" (Johari 15). Two attempts were made to overthrow the British, once in 1927 and the other in 1942 but the majority of the Nagas remained loyal to the English rulers and the British continued to have an authority over them. Such experiences often shape or reinforce our collective memory and community identity.As Japanese army along with INA soldiers marched into the town of Kohima, which is now the capital of Nagaland, the loyalty of the majority of Nagas towards the British complicated the situation.Mari, one of Kire's bestselling novels, exclusively deals with the war and its impact on the lives of a couple. Similarly, in her novel, A Respectable Women, the dreadful experience of World War II is described through the memory of the protagonist's mother, fondly addressed asAzuo (mother in Angami Naga language)in the following words,

Azuo remembered things in a fragmented manner and her stories were narrated without a beginning, a middle, and the end. You would just have to be around at the right moment to catch the story as it appeared, dredged up from her memory bank, and pondered upon as though it had been another lifetime altogether. (Kire 8)

Kire's novel explores the heritage, tradition and struggle of the Nagas, thereby influencing their cultural consciousness. In the course of the World War II, the battle of Kohima, often referred to as 'Stalingrad of the East', was fought over a

period which ranged from the 3rd of April to 22nd of June 1944. The Japanese reached India and tried to lay siege over Manipur and Nagaland. Kohima was placed at a strategic position since it would have enabled the Japanese to easily access the rest of India through its corridor. But they faced a formidable resistance from the British troopably ledby General Slim of the 14th Army regiment.Alongside the British troop, many young Nagas fought a valiant battle against the Japanese troops. It was one of the bloodiest battles ever fought. In his millitary memoir, titled "Defeat Into Victory" (1956), Field Marshal Sir William Slim, speaks highly of the gallant Nagas who were loyal to the empire and admitsthat without the aid of the Nagas, they wouldn't have been able to win the war against the Japanese. He pays tribute to them in the following words,

Despite floggings, torture, execution and the burning of their villages they refused to aid the Japanese in any way or to betray our troops. Their active help to us was beyond value or praise...They guided our columns, collected information, ambushed enemy patrols, carried our supplies, and brought in our wounded under the heaviestfire,and then, being the gentlemen they were often refused all payment. (Johari 16)
The war was one of the bloodiest ever fought in the North-East of India. It is presumed that the Japanese suffered 5764 casualties in the Kohima area and there were 1420 casualties on the allied side.

Azuo experienced the wraths of this war in the novel when she was around ten years of age. However, she recounted it years later. As Kevinuo, Azuo's daughter states, "It took my mother, Khonou, exactly forty-five years before she could bring herself to talk about the war" (Kire 3).In the chapter 'Mapping Kohima', Easterine Kire states that "The present decade possibly offers the last opportunity to record the life of Kohima in the post-war years from its survivors' memories. Recreating pre-war Kohima using their memories was a challenging task but not impossible" (Kire 164).Thus, she subtly blends history with memory and brings forth a powerful novel.

Kire has incorporated the factual events,as witnessed by the people, which had taken place at that time in Kohima. She categorically mentions that "I am including the information provided by people born and bred in Kohima town in the fifties" (Kire 170). Some characters mentioned in the fictional like Mr Neiliehu Belho and Vibeilie Belho did exist in the era.They had opened schools after the war for the children in Kohima. Similarly, the name of the Deputy Commissioner, Pawsey, is true to the image of the character in the novel. It was the Deputy Commissioner who went out of the way to ensure that normalcy was restored at the earliest.

The oral tradition, which has been vibrant among the Nagas, has been judiciously used by Easterine Kire in portraying the incidents in the novelboth aesthetically and realistically merging history and memory.Referring to the oral tradition, she states, "Oral sources on post-war Kohima give general pictures of the massive work of rebuilding that took place when the war was over. DC Pawsey had directed all administrative efforts into helping the native population to rebuild their homes and lives" (Kire 168).

Coming to the outbreak of the war, as depicted in the novel, it had a profound impact on all aspects of the indigenous life. Displacement caused by war was the first impact faced by Khonou and her people who had settled in Kohima.There was mass evacuation and they were moved to nearby villages of Chieswema, Mariema, Rusoma and Jotsoma. They had to stay in this new place for two months leaving behind their home and hearth but some families chose to stay behind, defying the orders of the Deputy Commissioner, Mr Pawsey.

The novel fosters a sense of humanity even amidst the killing, firing and burial as exemplified in the instance when Kire mentions about a certain Naga woman who saved and took care of a Nepali soldier. She not only nursed him back to life but made sure he was given proper food and clothing. Not only that, when two Japanese soldiers came ransacking for food, they caught sight of the Nepali soldier and were ready to kill him, but the woman came between them and claimed that he was her son and convinced the Japanese soldiers to leave him alone. The Nepali soldier tearfully bade farewell to the woman as he left to rejoin his battalion for she performed the duties of amotherto him. Such acts are rare during times of war but they do exist in society. We find numerous examples ofcivilians going out of their way to help others, who may not be from their own community, despite they themselves being in dire strait.

Kire also mentions about aNaga woman, Zeno, who buried many of the dead Japanese out of compassion and empathy as fellow human beings. In this novel, Kire mentions that people found a number of dead Japanese soldiers in their fields in the village; though they may have belonged to the enemy camp, their bodies were not left to rot away. Decent burial was given to these corpses.

As any other war narratives, we find the Nagas believing in the apparitions of the dead soldiers coming to haunt the place where they breathed their last. The Garrison Hill where a number of casualties took place became a frequent haunting ground. The villagers would often hear "the battalions of ghost soldiers who would march past to the rhythm of the accompanying band" (Kire 4-5). Though nobody saw these apparitions marching, they were heard almost every

night. In another instance,a Naga woman saw two ghosts dressed as British officials and they were called “ghosts of the cross” (Kire 5).

During Japanese invasion and occupation, apart from suffering dislocation, the local Nagas had to struggle with shortage of food.Much to the ire of the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Pawsey, the non-tribal traders like the Marwaries and the Bengalis who had set up grocery stores in Kohima had abandoned the place as it was continually being bombed. Fortunately, some Bengali traders had allowed their assistants to run the shop in their absence which helped in abating the shortage. Historically speaking, the Japanese troops when they had attacked Naga Hills had only three weeks’ supply of food with them. Once they had exhausted their food supply, they had no other option but to salvage for food from the Naga villages. This caused immense hardship for the civilians and many were on the brink of starvation. Fortunately for Azou’s family, her grandmother had kept hidden two sacks of rice at the outset of the war. They went unnoticed by the enemy soldiers who often scavenged and foraged for food in the abandoned village. Hence, Azou’s family were “Better off than many of our [their] neighbourswhere food was concerned. The war had lasted so long that people had either finished their stocks of food or had to stand by helplessly as the enemy stole the grain they had laboured so hard to produce” (Kire 12).

The people lived in constant fear and harsh conditions. Had not the DC distributed rice after the war many of them would have starved to death. The villagers couldn’t till their land that summer and had not the DC intervened again by supplying paddy seeds, they would have definitely faced starvation. The people lived in precarious position.

The war had caused a number of casualties on both sides, destroyed the existing infrastructure, disrupted production and trade, generated environmental degradation and forced many out of their homes. When Azuo and her family came back after the war, they had to spend the night in an abandoned dilapidated house like the other families who arrived before them. The house had holes owing to bombing and gunshots and the wind blew through them. But being exhausted, they clumped together in a bedroom and passed the night. As Kire states in the novel, “The next morning, we went to find our house and what a shock we got! Nothingwas left standing. The place was unrecognisable. There was tin strewn on the ground, and a few burnt planks were all that was left of our house” (Kire 9). This had a traumatic effect on the inhabitants.Judith Greenberg in her article states that-

Trauma can create "rememories"—paradoxical situations in which the event is inaccessible at the moment ofits occurrence and then possesses the survivor after a gap in time. Due to the detachment, numbing, evacuation, or "forgetting" during the traumatic moment, the experience—or a portion thereof—re-emerges later; the past reappears and, in its interruption, confuses the primacy of present reality. (320)

They cried and mourned over the total loss of what was once their home, “We saw several women mourning loudly because they could not find their houses any more. Kohima village was like nothing we had seen before. Most of the houses were gone...” (Kire 10).

The women mourned over the lost homes as if they were mourning their dead. Not a single house in the village escaped the fury of war. The only house to remain standing was Uncle Suohie’s house, though not totally unscathed, but, still standing upright. Azuo’s family took shelter there and tried to make themselves as well as Uncle Suohie’s familyas comfortable as possible.The hardship faced by the Nagas was physically and psychologically more far reaching than most could express. Sonakshi Srivastava in her book review of A Respectable Woman states,

In a close-knit community, grieving is as much a community affair as celebrating. The solidarity also stems from the trauma that the community collectively underwent during the wars, resounded and cemented by Azuo’s claim that war makes one benevolent...Incidents of such solidarity are scattered throughout the book.From ‘Amo’s Wives’ to letting out houses and sharing food, hatred and benevolence become the shade of one colour.(Srivastava 7 June 2019)

The houses in the village had to suffer collateral damage. It was deliberately destroyed by the allied forces to flush out the enemies. Rebuilding the houses was a formidable task which the villagers immediately took upon and temporary shelters were initially constructed till new ones were built and did their best to salvage a sense of normalcy in the midst of ruins after the war.

Some more horrifying sights awaited them after the war, Azuo, as a child,saw some dead bodies of the Japanese soldiers inside a giant oven. Apparently they were shooting at the allies from this position till they were themselves shot at. However, the British had not yet removed the corpses.

The war had also negative impact on public health and educational sectors. One of the adverse effects of war is on the students from the conflict zone who fall significantly behind in studies.Azuo and her contemporaries had missed schools for months and after the war they could not immediately resume classes. The government and the educationists

were concerned over this. Prior to the war, the missionaries had opened schools and proper education was imparted, but they left for America just when the war was about to start. It ultimately fell in the hands of Mr Neiliehu Belho and Mr Vibeilie Belho to revive the education system in the Naga Hills. And with the help of the Deputy Commissioner, teachers were appointed and classes resumed immediately, however, the memories of the war were still entrenched in the minds of the young children.Thiscan be seen from the way they would run out of the classrooms to hide in the trenches and take cover when the sirens sounded.This traumatic experience made the children reluctant to go to school. Portraying it, Kire states, "The fighter planes and sirens were a part of our recent past. Our parents had expected us to be exultant at going back to school. However, not everybody felt the same"(21).One of the characteristics of war trauma is the all-pervasive fear which holds a sway even in the aftermath of the war. Not only did the soldiers live in constant fear but it spilled over to the civilians as well.They lived in an atmosphere ofpermanent threat of the war looming over them.

Another painful but subtler aspect of the conflict merits attention and that is the news of the death of their loved ones. Sometimes they just received confirmed information that their son or brother is dead but they never saw or received the dead body.Marcin Zaremba in his article "The war Syndrome'-World War II and Polish Society," states,"The first and most important source of War related psychological traumas was the omnipresence of death. The practices linked with the burial of those killed in the course of war can be read as an attempt to overcome this trauma symbolically" (29). Easterine Kire's characters in the novel undergo the same trauma as she poignantly describes the pain and agony felt by them in the following words,

Some of Amo's friends who became soldiers around the same time as him never made it back. We heard they had died in Burma fighting the Japanese. Their bodies did not reach their families. That was a very sad thing for the family because our mourning customs are done around our dead, and in such circumstances, the family struggles to find healing and closure" (Kire 53).

In the novel, some soldiers just disappeared; nothing was known about their fate,neithertheir bodies ever reached their families, which made them live in traumatic stress, grief and constant anxiety.Azuo, who saw the war at close quarters, remarks,

Ours is a generation that has seen the devastation of war. We are people who know what it's like to lose everything almost overnight, home, loved ones, and life as we knew it before the war. When death is so imminent, some things in life simply stop being important. Some things become bigger, and small things turn insignificant. (Kire 37)

Though Azuo's family were spared of immediate death, they all had seen war and death at a very close range. Her brother, Amo,who had joined the army just before the war much against the wishes of his parents,brought laurels for the community and the family. As expressed by Kire in the following words,

He was our war hero. He had been decorated for his courage in the Second World War, and he had two medals. One was for his role in leading an attack on a post occupied by the Japanese. His group managed to kill the enemy and recapture the guns in that position. (Kire 36)

Amo had the heart of a child, he was a down to earth person who never bragged or showed off the medals he had been awarded with. But war had taken a toll over him since there was a splinter lodged near the heart, which was too close to be surgically removed. He eventually lived on with that wound and led a sedentary life, but he won the hearts of the people around him. So much so that when he died at the age of 39, there was not "a dry eye at the burial" (39). The nemesis of war had finally reached him.

War brought the Naga people to a different aspect of life; they were seeing planes for the first time, planes which dropped rations, leaflets, and even bombs in Japanese occupied areas. As Azuo in the novel states, "The war brought the outside world so much closer to us; in fact, it brought the world to us. And it brought home the reality of death to our young minds" (Kire 54).

In the article "On War Writing, A Roundtable Discussion," Marilyn Nelson states:

While one can never truly experience the experience of another, storytellers have mesmerized audiences with stories of heroes and their adventures ever since extended families gathered around the very first campfires. War writing continues that gift of story, allowing readers in this and subsequent generations to imagine that most painful, most trying, terrifying, testing experience through words. (Nelson 103)

True to this, Easterine Kire has poignantly re-created the war scenarioand has brought alive to the readers the agonizing, terrifying moments of the Second World War faced by the citizens of Kohima with startling clarity. Her

recapturing of the past and presenting it in the present form goes in line with what Georg Lukacs in his seminal work, The Historical Novel (1963) states,

…the historical novel must show the entire nation ('the people') as the true moving force of history. To be able to do this, the novelist should abstain from concentrating on the exceptional and should instead foreground the ordinary as a manifestation of the typical. The average person, rather than the grand historical figure, seemed to be the best material for a novel. (Tihanov 50)

Kire has focused on the ordinary citizens and has vividly described the effects of the war on the villagers as a whole. She has depicted typical characters in a specific historical situation, taking the Second World War as the backdrop.She has depicted the interplay of individual lives and social forces, and the novel does not focus on a king or a general but on the ordinary people in history. By revisiting the past, the readers are given an opportunity to subtly critique the contemporary society and its issues such as class, gender and colonialism. The characters in the novel have undergone traumatic experiences but have been resilient.

Resilience in a person is dependent on social systems that provide positive support, it operates at and across multiple levels, asSippel et al states in the paper, "…wherein individual resilience is best understood as the interplay between characteristics of the individual, life circumstances, and context, e.g., family, community, and culture."The citizens in the novel, who had experienced war, suffered together and rallied again. They endured silently but were able to narrate trauma and even rebuild their lives. Easterine Kire's novelA Respectable Woman is a true example of the Naga community who carry trauma but resist annihilation through oral tradition of storytelling, a hallmark of trauma literature; and we see resilience in their act of remembering and narrating their experience thereby preserving memory against historical erasure.

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