The Great Derangement and Storyteller’s Prerogative: Knowledge From the Hearth*

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Mythology plays an important role in the sustenance of a particular community. It embeds the ancient knowledge that percolates through folktales into the knowledge system of that community. However, such mythologies have often been dismissed by votaries of scientific knowledge on the ground that these mythologies are preposterous and do not have scientific basis. Consequently, the traditional form of knowledge which has helped in the sustenance of particular community is disrupted. It eventually led to invasion of alien ideas and culture which is not conducive for the growth and protection of that community life. As a result, the relation between man and nature is also disrupted. The present world has been ripped apart by the onslaught of industrialisation in the name of progress and development and people have turned immensely materialistic and as such have not only lost their reverence for nature, but also have facilitated into the decadence of their traditional system of knowledge that otherwise would have shielded the affinity between man and nature. Amitav Ghosh talks about this problem in his non-fiction The Great Derangement; and similarly many Indian writers have also addressed this issue through stories, poetry, and fiction. Eastern Kire Iralu is one such writer from the Northeast India who has blended myth and folktale in her novella titled The Son of the Thundercloud. Her purpose is to allegorize the pathetic plight of the people in present-day world because of their irreverence to nature. She does it by invoking myth and folktale. She has shown in her novella that how ancient system of knowledge, through folk tales, tries to provide valuable knowledge that is required for sustenance of mankind. This paper analyses the novella of Easterine Kire Iralu which offers a way-out from the present day crisis mentioned by Amitabh Ghosh. Easterine Kire Iralu’s novella has established the importance of folktales in primitive societies and its relevance in the present day world. Kire has bended mythology and realism to show the symbiotic relationship between man and nature and thereby she establishes the indispensability of storytellers’ role in bailing out mankind of the present crisis.

Keywords: great derangement, industrialization, myth, global warming

Introduction

The paper attempts to see the storyteller, the oral traditions and the ecology of a particular location as an organic whole with reference to Kire’s novella Son of the Thundercloud. The geopolitical location of the novelist in question, the setting of the story, and the politics of development explain the novelist’s use of the ancient myth with environmental concern. However, this also constitutes the problematic. The novel

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substantially draws on Biblical figures, like Jesus and Virgin Mary, which gives it a Christian texture, on the other hand, the Angami traditional tribal society’s view of nature and society is a sharp contrast to this. The novelist’s attempt to negotiate these opposite tendencies of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in maneuvering her thematic concern gives the work a new dimension.

**Background to the Study**

The tribal communities in Northeast India have been living amidst nature since time immemorial and most of their rituals, customs, and beliefs are shaped by their sensibility arising out of their interaction with the world of Nature. Madhav Gadgil and others have pointed out that such traditional knowledge about the ecology and environment is handed down from one generation to another through cultural transmission (Berkes & Folke, 1994). Culture is preserved through oral tradition. The oral traditions those emerged out of this symbiotic relationship with nature explain the nature of their oral traditions: proverbs, folkelores, folksongs, and myths (Sen & Kharmawphlang, 2007). The storytellers are the custodians of the oral traditions who help in preserving this traditional knowledge system in tribal societies (Mark Turin, 2013; Vansina, 2009). The harmony between human and nature, that has otherwise been made possible because of the traditional knowledge system, is on the wane today because of the onslaught of modern technologies that threat to “other” the traditional knowledge system as unscientific and detrimental to progress and development. The negative effect of the modern technologies can be seen in the world today in the form of the great derangement and climate change (Carson, 1962; Ghosh, 2016; Guha, 2016).

**Textual Analysis**

Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud* is a retelling of the Naga myth of evolution: *Tiger, Spirit and Humankind* (Mao, 2009). The myth states that out of the union between the first woman and the clouds of the sky were born three children: A Tiger, a Spirit, and a Man. When the mother was growing old, each of the sons took their turn to nurse her. The Tiger desired to eat her flesh after her death; the Spirit made her more “feverish”; but the Man nursed her with care. Before the mother’s death, all the three children had laid a claim to her land. To resolve

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1 Oral traditions are the rich repository of traditional knowledge in tribal societies that help in their sustenance. It has also been noticed in some of these societies (for example, Myth of Hynnewtrep in Khasi society has given them the platform to claim reservations and benefits from the Indian government based on ethno-nationalist identity) that the oral traditions are associated with social and ecological function. Beyond this, the oral traditions also preserve the various customary laws that keep those societies intact. The folklorists from Northeast India, like Caroline R Marak, Temsula Ao, Anil Boro, and Desmond L Kharmawphlang (all belonging to various tribal communities) have a consensus about this function of the oral traditions in their respective societies. One aspect of such oral tradition also deals with the conservation of flora and fauna, which shows their understanding of a sustainable ecosystem (for example, not hunting a pregnant deer, or not fishing during breeding seasons, taboos about rare animals and trees). In other words, they were concerned about protecting the flora and fauna which were indispensable for their sustenance. Interlinked with this is the function of the storytellers. They carry forward the embedded knowledge system through the oral traditions from one generation to another.

2 Pelevotso’s grandmother and Sidze (Rhalie’s Aunt) exemplify this trait. The novella abounds in stories related to various kinds of taboos about seed-grain, agricultural practices, drunken brawls and abandoned village which explain the tribal way of life. The knowledge about these taboos and other cultural practices are handed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. Mesanuo and other female characters in the novella have been presented to be closer to nature and they are the ones who teach the younger generation about the benefit of nature. For instance, Rhalie is taught about the use of herbs by Aunt Siedze. Pele is taught about the taboos and Naga-belief by his grandmother who was also a healer and herb-gatherer. Spirit Tiger and its influence: “‘Pelevotso’, she said, using his full name, ‘this is not a tiger of flesh and blood. It looks and acts like one, but it is really a spirit tiger. If the people of this village are sacrificing to it, it must have spread its influence while we were gone. You will need spiritual weapon to kill it. My son has his spear from my sisters. He can kill it with that, but not with just any other spear.’” (Kire, 2016, p. 121).
the dispute, the mother arranges a contest among the three but through a stratagem she helps the Man to win. Disgusted, the Tiger and the Spirit part ways forever. What is significant here is that the mother has used her knowledge and intelligence to help her favoured son to win the contest. And she has entrusted the responsibility to the Man to look after the land. Although the Tiger, the Spirit, and the Man are presented as three separate individuals, they can actually be seen as three different aspects of a man. The humane aspect of man is preferred than the other two aspects that are represented by the Tiger and the Spirit. Kire has integrated this myth in the schema of her narrative by foregrounding the importance of a storyteller in a tribal society from an ecocritical perspective.

The novella begins with a story that refers to a prophecy about the birth of “son of the thundercloud”, who will kill the Tiger, that had killed his father and brothers. Pelevotso, the perpetual traveller, represents mankind in the novella. After the death of his wife and child, he sets out on a journey to reach the village of the weavers (the site of the prophecy). Thereafter in the village of the weavers, the Tiger-widow (Mesanuo is called so because her husband and seven children had been killed by a tiger), gets impregnated by a drop of rain from the thundercloud, eventually giving birth to Rhalie (Redeemer), the “son of the thundercloud”. Pelevotso has heard this story as a child and he believed in it. He was told that he could see it happening in his lifetime, so he started his journey to see the “son of the thundercloud”. Pelevotso, which means “faithful to the end”, stands by Mesanuo and believes in the prophecy. Mesanuo in Angami language means “the pure one” and the novelist uses the name to give credence to the prophecy. The miraculous impregnation of Mesanuo by the raindrop is an allegorical representation of the Virgin Mary being overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit and conceiving the seed of God’s word. Similarly the names of her sister Kethonuo (Truth) and Siezde (Future) also have symbolic significance in the novella. The consequences of the Rhalie’s birth were as extraordinary as much as the circumstances in which he was born. The land to which Pelevotso travelled was blighted by draught for seven centuries and human life along with the flora and fauna were at the verge of extinction. However, the rain that has impregnated Mesanuo, impregnated the earth as well (setting a link between earth and Mesanuo). Overnight the land was filled with lush green vegetation, rocks, and animals, and so does Mesanuo gives birth to the child next morning. The villagers were overwhelmed by this transformation and they reach the doorsteps of Mesanuo to witness this miracle:

Proudly she showed them the baby. Once more the headman fell to his knees, with his hands covering his face.

“Forgive us, Widow, forgive me I didn’t know, I didn’t believe the stories.” He was almost weeping as he grovelled before her…

“Just one question before I go. Where have those trees and rocks come from?”

“It’s called birthing, headman. The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones, and grain, just as a mother births her offspring. The trees and rocks are the sons of the earth. Take care of them and they will take care of you and your children.”

(Kire, 2016, pp. 45-46)

Mesanuo tells Pelevotso that how the land had been visited by two kinds of famine, the one that starved the people physically and the other one spiritually: “No, I am talking about the famine of stories and songs. They killed all the storytellers who tried to tell them about the Son of the Thundercloud. They killed hope”

(Kire, 2016, p. 48).

Mesanuo informs Pelevotso that once the land was full of storytellers, who used to spread joy and hope through their stories. However, those storytellers had been killed by “dark ones”, who did not want the storytellers to transform people’s minds with their stories. Whenever people heard stories they sought to
become free: “Free of fear, free of shame and constant desire” (Kire, 2016, p. 63). Without the stories, the people become enslaved to the “dark ones”. These “dark ones” thrive on fear and greed.

They build fences, they hoard and guard, they want the trees and rivers and the stars to bend to their will. … but when the storytellers were killed, one after the other, people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness. (Kire, 2016, p. 64)

With this foregrounding of the storyteller’s importance in the society, Kire brings in the interplay of the Angami Naga myth on the story which has been mentioned earlier. This aspect has to be understood with reference to Kire’s geopolitical position as a novelist. Historians, like Richard Hugh Grove and Ramachandra Guha, have pointed out that the colonisers had destabilised the tribal societies in India (Guha & Gadgil, 1994). However, in the case of the Naga tribe, it had been quite problematic. The Naga tribe was brought within the fold of Christianity only towards the end of the nineteenth century, prior to which they had their tribal way of life including the head-hunting expeditions. The American Baptist Missionaries have not only converted the Naga people but also changed their world view in a significant way. The colonial rulers, who saw the “savage” races as the other, by supplanting Christian beliefs into the minds of the Naga have distanced the “Naga-self” from their identity. What constituted the “self” has now become the “other” for the Nagas as well creating a situation of identity crisis. However, this perspective is outside the ambit of this paper. What is important to notice here is that the Naga novelist has used the characters of Jesus and Virgin Mary allegorically to emphasise the need to believe in miracles conveyed through stories and, at the same time, she is trying to integrate the Naga traditional view of “nature” by correlating to the Angami Naga myth of the Tiger, Spirit and Mankind. This fusion is itself problematic because of the anthropocentric view of Christianity and the imperial mindset of colonisers. For example, the episode from the Old Testament where the Israelites have been forced to live in wilderness for 40 years, the episode from the New Testament when Jesus was forced to live in a hostile wilderness for 40 days point to the fact that nature is seen as hostile to mankind. Further the Old Testament also gives man the dominion over the fishes and animals which is indicative of the master-slave relationship (Genesis 1:27) (Grasse, 2016). Precisely, man had been designated to rule over nature and use it for his own survival. With the colonial expansion, the Western world has sought to exploit natural resources and use it to hoard limitless wealth. This is where the distinction between nature and culture lie. To produce more to accumulate wealth is the part of culture, and to fulfill need is a part of nature. The colonisers have also depicted the natural world as hostile and adverse to them as in the case of Australia, whereas on the contrary, the tribal and the so-called “savage” people consider themselves to be a part of nature. The politics of development and progress and the anthropocentric approach to the colonised nations have not only devastated the wealth and economy, but also the ecology and the culture of the colonised nations: “The kind of homogenising capital intensive transformation of people, trade, economy and environment with which we are familiar today can be traced back at least as far as the beginnings of European colonial expansion…” (Grove, 2011, p. 498).

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3 Naga tribe is not a homogenous entity. It is more of a collective term used to denote the various tribes who call themselves Naga. There are 16 different Naga tribes speaking their distinct languages.

4 Amitav Ghosh in his book The Great Derangement narrates his experience of depicting a particular scene of the tide that sweeps away the forests of Sunderban in his epoch-making novel The Hungry Tide. Ghosh narrates that only a day after writing the particular episode, he saw in television the effects of Tsunami and at once he could feel that the intensity and magnitude of the scene that he had depicted in his novel is proportionate to what he has witnessed on the television that day. What is interesting to note here is that the aboriginal tribes in Andaman and Nicobar islands have been left unhurt because they could take precaution ahead of the Tsunami, whereas, the ones who are more closer to modern society have suffered severe damage (Bhaumik, 2005).
Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist, in her article “Decolonising relationships with Nature” has analysed how the “othering” process had been brought into play by the technological society:

Nature is represented as inessential and massively denied as the unconsidered background to technological society. Since anthropocentric culture sees non-human nature as a basically inessential constituent of the universe, nature’s deeds are systematically omitted from account and consideration in decision-making. Dependency upon nature is denied, systematically, so that nature’s order, resistance and survival requirements are not perceived as imposing a limit upon human goals and enterprise. (Plumwood, 2011, p. 505)

Kire’s novella is a take on this dystopian aspect of the technological society and her views are that of an environmentalist (Garrard, 2013, p. 21), i.e., of interdependence. On the one hand, Kire rejects the anthropocentric attitude of the western Christian society; on the other hand, through her tribal sensibility acknowledges the need of storytellers, traditional knowledge system and its integration with her religious faith by invoking Biblical characters.

The novella underscores the need of trees and rivers for human sustainability. The “dark force” mentioned by Mesanuo, the Tiger from the Myth and village headman all seem to be the agents of the politics of progress and development. The “dark forces” took control of the Nature and thereby changed the way the tribal/colonised/primitive’ people looked at nature. The greed that is manifested in the character of the Tiger from the myth is one of the aspects of the “dark forces”, which want to conquer and tame nature so that its resources could be exploited. The village headman is the type who gets overwhelmed by the “dark forces”. The village headman is ambivalent in his outlook. He tells Pelevotso about the importance of seed-grain in a tribal society, at the same time, he intends to sacrifice the “son of the thundercloud” to appease the Tiger (read as greed of the dark forces). At one time, he believes in the prophecy when he witnesses the transformation (miracle) around him, at another time he says:

“So you don’t believe the story that a raindrop fell on her and made her conceive a child?” The headman looked scornful as he said this…”She had a lover. She must have had one; the whole village believes that now.”…”People prefer to believe what is more plausible rather than what is miraculous”, the headman replied with an unpleasant look in his eyes. (Kire, 2016, p. 116)

The headman conspires to kill Rahlie but before he could give shape to this plan, Rahlie in an encounter with the Tiger kills it, thereby fulfilling the prophecy. When Pelevotso and Rahlie return to the village after killing the Tiger, in a customary manner the village headman stops them at the gate and says: “‘Do not come. You have killed our elder brother, do not come.’ That was the traditional initiation of the many rituals of tiger killing” (Kire, 2016, p. 131). At a physical level, the Tiger is just an animal and also a brother according to the Naga myth; but metaphorically the Tiger is the lower aspect of mankind, the greedy side of the village headman. The character of the “Tiger” and the “Spirit” that was witnessed in the Myth becomes internalised in the nature

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5 It has a serious economic and political implication in the present day India. The alarming rise in the suicide of farmers and crop failure has rocked the Indian parliament that could even topple a government. Indian economy is basically an agrarian economy. The use of High Yielding Varieties and Genetically Modified Seeds has resulted in the extinction of the local variety of grain-seeds and the farmers increasingly had to rely on the big corporate farms for the supply of the seeds. The novelist repeatedly points out the importance of the Seed-grain. The Nagaland government has initiated Gene Pool conservation of indigenous rice varieties by investing rupees 250 million in 2017 in order to tackle the effects of climate change on crops (Climate Change Adaptation-NER). The novelist uses the idea of “seed-grain” in the novel as a metaphor for the traditional way of agriculture based on traditional knowledge system. The harmful effect of the pesticides and fertilizers on the health is also another vital issue which has been overlooked in India till date, whereas as early as 1962 Rachel Carson has written about its effect in her book *The Silent Spring*. 

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of the village headman.

Eventually the village headman’s son Viphru kills Rhalie during a village hunt event. Out of grief, Mesanuo too passes away. The end signals the end of hope and also the end of the storytellers in the society. The triumph of the village headman in establishing that people only believe what is plausible has far greater ramifications that cannot be gauged superficially. In the absence of the storytellers, the custodians of traditional knowledge in the tribal societies, the “dark forces” get a free run to exploit the natural resources. The present generation in this sense is back to square one. All rhetorics of progress and development are nullified by the immeasurable trail of destruction and seize compounded by each passing generation, which demolishes the “primitive” societies to build a new society, a process of gradual and inevitable self-effacement. The world has now sounded a high-alert on the environmental crisis and the impending apocalypse (Garrard, 2013, pp. 93-116).

The exploitation of the natural resources has led to the loss of habitat not only for plants, animal, and aquatic life but also it has displaced the tribal communities. Whereas most of the nations are talking about the sustainable development goals, responsible consumption and production remain only as a theoretical idea. On the contrary, there is an effort to increase the production and consumption. As Greg Garrard (2013) rightly pointed out: “Change the political structure of society so that production to meet real needs replaces production for the accumulation of wealth, it is argued, and the ecological problem of limits produced by capital’s structural need for perpetual growth will disappear” (p. 31). The offshoot of such progress and developments are well discernible in the form of climate change and great derangement.

**Conclusion**

Kire has beautifully blended, in allegorical terms, the myth with the story to highlight the crisis which the tribal society is exposed to today. The ecological preservation that was possible because of the traditional knowledge system of the tribal societies has been ignored and suppressed in the wake of modernisation process. The sanctity of the human-nature relation is desecrated. The importance of the “storyteller” as the custodian of this knowledge system is germane to the sustainability of the tribal society. As the novella unfolds, one can see how the plot addresses each of the issues mentioned above. Kire has delineated the characters with symbolic names that represent truth, water, hope, purity, etc. and these characters share a very complex symbiotic relation. Nature is shown as bounteous but mysterious. The novelist does not try to decipher the mysteries of nature, rather she sends a message through the characters that nature should be respected and not dissected.

**References**


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6 The Chakma tribe has been uprooted and displaced from the Chittagong Tract when Bangladesh government built a dam at that site.