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Situating Writings in English from Nagaland: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are two Naga writers who could be attributed with the distinction of being the forerunners of writings in English from Nagaland. It can also be stated that it is their works that predominantly represent Nagaland in the field of literature. In this context, the paper is an attempt to analyze and then show how they have contributed towards the formation and development of the genre, Writings in English from Nagaland. The stated objective will be achieved by following a trajectory in which it will first examine how their creative writings have managed to reach out and inspire young Naga writers through two very important mediums of communication in the contemporary context which is the English language and the creative writing. It will be done by situating Writings in English from Nagaland within the framework of postcolonial literature. In addition, through a select reading of their works it will show how literature is an important site not only for preserving but also for a reassessment of culture, tradition and history. In this way, the paper will also prove that Kire and Ao, while ensuring a rich documentation and a critical examination of the Naga way

of life and history, simultaneously manage to stir up interest and impart knowledge of the Naga people to a wide range of audience.

Keywords: English language, creative writing, documentation, postcolonial literature, Naga writers.

Introduction: Contextualizing Writings in English from Nagaland

The literary scene in Nagaland has been witnessing an interesting activity since the dawn of the current century. It is the proliferation of young Naga creative writers writing in English. The paper proposes that Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are the inspirations behind this fascinating phenomenon along with their contemporaries, Nini Lungalung and Monalisa Changkija who have written powerful works of poetry. The reason why Kire and Ao are proposed as the main inspirations or the steady force behind the development of creative writings in English from Nagaland is because of their consistent and remarkable contributions to the world of literature and education which has won them recognition from the literary fraternity and the general public. Easterine Kire's book, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003) is the first novel written in English from Nagaland. Her self-published book of poetry titled, *Kelhoukevira* (1982) is also the first collection of poems from Nagaland. She was awarded the Nagaland Governor's Medal for Excellence in Literature in 2011 and the Catalan PEN International Free Voice Award in 2013. She won the 2016 Hindu Literary Prize award for the novel, *When the River Sleeps* and won the Tata Book of

the Year for fiction for the novel, *Son of the Thundercloud* in 2017. Her novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy* was selected by the Government of India to be translated into six UNESCO languages. On the other hand, Temsula Ao is the first Naga woman to attain the position of a Professor from Nagaland. She won the Padma Shri Award for Literature and Education in 2007. She also won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for Indian Writing in English for her collection of short stories *Laburnum for My Head* in 2013. She has received the Nagaland Governor's Award for Distinction in Literature in 2009 and the Governor's Gold Medal from the government of Meghalaya in the same year.

Hence, it is clear that these two versatile writers have brought recognition to writings in English from Nagaland within a short span of time. The mentioned accolades are just a few amongst many that have been awarded to them. Their works are studied not only at Nagaland University but in a number of universities across India. Their works have also been translated into several Indian and foreign languages. Such widespread popularity has had a positive influence on the Naga literati. A few of the prominent emerging young Naga writers were interviewed in order to understand the kind of influence Kire and Ao have had on them. When asked if Kire and Ao are the inspirations behind their interest in creative writing, Avinuo Kire[1] affirmed: "Of course! Being pioneers in the genre of Naga Literature in English, they have paved the way for younger writers who came after." (Kire Interview) Emisenla Jamir,[2] another writer shared how she realized that it is possible to write about one's own people and place after reading the works of Kire and Ao. She said:

I had never felt the need to write about the 'Naga experience'. But reading their works opened my eyes to the

kind of writing that I wanted to pursue. Their writings showed me the possibility of writing in English without denying my Naga heritage. (Jamir Interview)

Similarly, Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o[3] also said that it was Kire and Ao who introduced her to a form of writing that she could finally relate to. She responded:

They were the first ones to introduce me to Naga landscapes and settings and people. Before them, I had read only about English landscapes and characters that I was nevertheless fascinated, but which I cannot really relate to. However, Kire and Ao have introduced a form of writing that was not just filled with familiar settings and people, but they created a world where people can relate to and live through the lives of their characters. (Mepfhu-o Interview)

An analysis of the responses shed light on an interesting aspect of what has now come to be known as *Writings in English from Nagaland*. The young Naga writers who grew up reading about foreign cultures and places admit that they did not know how to write about their own people, culture and land until Kire and Ao showed them how to weave stories around one's own tradition, history and experiences. This proves that Kire and Ao are indeed the progenitors of the genre, *Writings in English from Nagaland*. It is they who formulated a literary framework that could articulate Naga life and worldview. Hence, Kire and Ao along with their contemporaries like Lungalung and Changkija could be considered as the first-generation Naga creative writers writing in English who paved the way for young Naga creative writers. As a result, the literary terrain in Nagaland since the dawn of the current millennium is witnessing a fascinating epoch which is attested by the remarkable germination of young Naga creative writers writing in English. The seeds

sowed by Kire, Ao and their contemporaries since the last two decades of the twentieth century are bearing fruits in the form of these promising young writers.

Another interesting development that has taken place in Nagaland which has in turn led to the growth in literary output from Naga people is the establishment of publishing houses in Nagaland by writers and intellectuals. They are: Barkweaver Publication of which Easterine Kire is a founder member, Dr. Lanusangla Tzudir's, Heritage Publishing House (established in 2008) and Vishu Rita Krocha's PenThrill Publication House (established in 2013). Apart from actively discovering, mentoring and promoting young Naga writers, the most noteworthy aspect of these pioneer publishing houses is the fact that they are owned and managed by Naga women. This is certainly a significant commentary on the role of Naga women in advancing literary output from Nagaland.

The English Language and the Postcolonial Literature: A Deliberation

An important reason for the success and popularity of Kire and Ao is the medium of communication that they use. Given the contemporary cultural context, the use of English language made it easier for them to reach out to the young Nagas and to the world. In the introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*, Tillotoma Misra observes that most of the younger writers in the anthology wrote in English because of the English-medium education they received that made them more proficient in English language over their own mother tongues. She also predicted that the number of writers writing in English will increase because English is the official language of most of the states of North-East India and hence

more widely spoken (Introduction xv). Nagaland is the perfect case in point. The official language of Nagaland is English as there are so many tribes with their own distinct languages unintelligible to each other. Also, the pedagogy inherited since colonial times have been producing generations of Nagas who are more comfortable communicating only in the English language. Avinuo Kire explained in the interview that her education in English medium school meant reading, writing and eventually thinking and expressing herself in the English vernacular. As a result, she says it is "easier and more natural to write in English." (Kire Interview) Another writer interviewed, Sentilong Ozukum[4] also attributed the reason for writing in the English language to his English medium education where his mother-tongue, the Ao language, was not taught in school. In such a scenario, it is clear that usage of English language becomes inevitable and a necessary tool in the case of Nagaland. (Ozukum Interview)

The debate surrounding the usage of English by the erstwhile colonized has been an integral part of postcolonial literature. While writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o discontinued writing in English and advocated for the restructuring of his country's education system, there are writers like Salman Rushdie who boldly pronounce that "English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world" and considers its popularity and a writer's command over it as a reason for celebration (Introduction xiv). In the context of North-East writers, according to Tillotoma Misra, the usage of English language is necessary because of "the small sizes of the linguistic groups to which many of the writers belong" (Introduction xvi). At the same time, she also believes that it serves to benefit them as it paves a way to share their works with readers all over the world (Introduction xvi). Similarly, Bill Ashcroft et al. in the *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* explains, "Many

other non-English speaking writers who have chosen to write in English do so not because their mother tongue is regarded by them as inadequate, but because the colonial language has become a useful means of expression, and one that reaches the widest possible audience" (16). However, it should be made sure that vernacular languages are also kept alive and thriving. Compared to the rest of the world and majority of India, Nagaland entered the world of written tradition only recently, it is still at its nascent stage and has just begun to explore the field of creative writing in English. If translation is encouraged and picked up by young Nagas at the same pace as creative writing is being embraced, there is hope for revival of literature and language in the vernacular amongst the Nagas. This will also further enrich production and circulation of literature from Nagaland.

No doubt English language has benefitted the writers but it is undeniable that a lot is also being lost in the process. Today there is a threat of extinction of many native languages around the world. The scenario in Nagaland is such that for many of the younger generations, their own mother tongues are unintelligible to them because they have been educated in English-medium boarding schools away from home from a very young age. Added to this is the use of Nagamese, a pidgin of the Assamese and the Hindi languages which is being widely spoken by people of Nagaland. Even the school curriculum does not actively encourage the study of vernacular languages. As a result, only Tenyidie language amongst the many Naga languages has managed to reach the required standard to be taught at higher education level. In the text, *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, Temsula Ao admits, "Back home, when I started collection of data, I realized that even as a native speaker of the Ao-Naga language my knowledge about my own culture was limited and peripheral. It was so

because I represent the so-called 'educated, urban' fringe of the people" (Preface i-ii). The interviewed writers belong to the same section as Ao. They have been brought up in the urban towns of Nagaland and have been educated in English medium schools and universities located in the various states of India. They express their lack of proficiency in their vernacular languages with regret. There is an obvious lack of confidence in writing in one's own mother tongue that could be deduced from the responses of the writers. This is a direct result of the current socio-cultural environment of Nagaland. T. Keditsu[5] in the interview said, "I can speak rudimentary Tenyidie and Sümitsa. This is something that pains me greatly. Every word I write in English is a silence added to my two mother tongues." (Keditsu Interview) It is a chilling reminder of Ao's experience when as a Fulbright fellow at the University of Minnesota she attended a language class where indigenous adults were learning their own mother tongue and it dawned on her that, "these young men and women in particular and other such natives who would never fully grasp and feel their native culture due to the loss of language, which is the medium to the heart and soul of any culture" (Ao Naga i-ii).

However, writing in the English language does not mean that a writer is being untrue to one's roots and identity. The writer should not be indicted as being unfaithful to one's heritage. A non-English writer writing in English should not be coerced into feeling guilty because it is the combined historical and political circumstances that have made English language indispensable. At the same time, it is also important to recognise the benefit of writing in English language. Kire, Ao and the once colonised natives writing in English language is what postcolonial theory terms as appropriation. In the essay, "Replacing Language: Textual Strategies in Post-

Colonial Writing", the writers, Bill Ashcroft et al. discuss appropriation as one of the strategies used in postcolonial writing. In *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, the same writers explain, "By appropriating the imperial language, its discursive forms and its modes of representation, post-colonial societies are able, as things stand, to intervene more readily in the dominant discourse, to interpolate their own cultural realities, or use that dominant language to describe those realities to a wide audience of readers" (16). Kire's and Ao's writings achieve just that. Their narration of the Naga way of living does not fail to capture the essential nature of a Naga despite the usage of a language that is not their own. Another important feature of postcolonial writing, is abrogation which is defined as "a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (37). Kire's and Ao's narrative seamlessly blend native words with English language. In their hands, code switching becomes a powerful tool through which they are able to document and explain words and terms to the readers which otherwise no longer find usage in the day-to-day communication even amongst the native speakers. Kire's style of narration especially invokes the lost art of oral storytelling which is intrinsic to Naga tradition. She successfully incorporates the motif of oral narration in most of her stories to invoke a sense of the Naga oral tradition.

Naga Worldview in Perspective

The first novel from Nagaland by Easterine Kire, *A Naga Village Remembered*, presents the Naga way of life through the story of ordinary villagers. In the novel, Kire records Angami traditional practices and beliefs by weaving them around the everyday existence of the characters in order to

present their worldview. The works of Kire and Ao forces one to introspect on questions such as - What is a Naga if one forgets one's folklores especially the origin myths? What is a Naga if dreams are considered as mere manifestations of the subconscious? What is a Naga if one stops believing in the coexistence of the spiritual and the human world? At the same time, the writers encourage the readers to put their traditional practices and beliefs in perspective by writing about them in a manner that provokes readers to analyze and probe instead of passively internalizing the values that has been attached to it by their ancestors.

To highlight the Naga way of life, the historical novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2016) by Easterine Kire will be examined first followed by Temsula Ao's collection of poems, *Songs from the Other Life* (2007). This will be done through a close reading of the feast of merit. Kire describes the specifics of the significance of the feast, who is entitled to it, what it means for the social standing of the host, how a household prepares for and performs the ceremony is described because it was one of the most important practices throughout Naga tribes. The feast of merit is one of the Naga practices that the colonial administrators and ethnographers have uniformly recorded in their writings. In the introduction to *Naga Identities: Changing Local Cultures in the Northeast of India*, Marion Wettstein also notes, "Another unique cultural feature of the Nagas that the ethnographers meticulously documented were the cycles of rituals, especially those of the feasts of merit" (Introduction 18). Kire adds minute details with regard to the feast including one of the most important beliefs in a Naga society which is the dream. She starts the chapter in this manner: "Keviselie HAD HAD A dream. It was good, very good. He had dreamt of the short-tailed *gwi,* and in the morning he took it as an indicator of the creator's willingness

for him to earn a title" (37). In a clear-cut manner, Kire introduces the significant place that dreams hold in a Naga's life and how dreams are interpreted. A few months back the village elders had observed that Keviselie should host a feast of merit because he has been blessed with excellent harvests. He had been considering the suggestion in his mind but it was the dream that confirmed the observation made by the elders. He had dreamt about the short-tailed *gwi* which is the *bos frontalis*, or commonly known as *mithun*. The interpretation was made on the basis of the *gwi's* association with prestige amongst the Nagas which is a belief that is upheld till date and so it is accepted as a clear indication from the spirits to acknowledge their blessings by holding a feast of merit. In an interesting manner Kire explains the rituals involved in the feast of merit step by step. After Keviselie was convinced that the spirits wanted him to hold a feast of merit, he goes to meet the priests seeking for their advice. They guide him with instructions about his role and the role of two priests to be carried out during the festival of *Terhunyi*, which is a festival that is celebrated to praise the creator after harvest is completed and brought in. Kire then makes a step-by-step elucidation of how the various rituals are performed and observed. First, the ritual of *phichu pehei* which is blessing of the feast giver's household is performed and then Pushu day is observed five days before the blessing by the elders. On this day the wife prepares meal for a Thepa and a Thevo clansmen in order to "initiate her husband's title taking ceremony" (39). She then goes on to describe the duties of these two men, the observation of *genna* day to sanctify the brew, sacrifice of a chicken and performance of the ceremony by the husband and wife in minutiae. Only after all the rituals were observed through the guidance of the priests and through the assistance of friends and family, "Keviselie was able to

feast the whole clan at his sha, the feast of merit" (45). Thus, by incorporating the feast of merit in the story, Kire is able to explain the meanings behind tradition and belief systems while at the same time successfully documenting it. It also points out an important aspect of the Naga way of life which is communal living - feasting with the entire clan and village, inviting all relatives including those living in different villages during special ceremonies, distribution of portions of meat amongst friends and kinsmen, gift giving amongst friends and friendship between men. Thus, sharing, merry making and friendship across clans, villages and tribes defines the Naga world.

Secondly, Temsula Ao's collection of poems, *Songs from the Other Life* (2007) which is based on myths and legends that have been passed on from generation to generation through word of mouth will be examined. Through the poems in the collection, Ao shows how folklore is not just distant stories composed out of pure imagination but by retelling it she shows that it is lived everyday by the Ao people. In the poem, "The Old-Storyteller" from the mentioned collection, she explains the motivation that drives her to write. She says:

Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic
We could lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.

So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
To instill in the young
A sense of perpetuating

Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation. (241)

However, the poet notices that young people including her grandson are no longer interested in listening to stories. The poet laments the loss of an important tradition which is that of passing on history in the form of folklore through word of mouth from one generation to another. The poet is deprived of the rich legacy, the privilege and pleasure of imparting knowledge as was done in the olden days. Her grandson's refusal to listen to her stories is seen as a threat and a possible repetition of history because according to Ao-Naga legend their ancestors had their script written on an animal hide (240) but a dog managed to devour it and their script was lost forever. All these reasons enrage the poet and fills her with the desire "To wrench the thieving guts /Out of that Original Dog / And consign all my stories/ To the script in his ancient entrails" (242).

In "A Tiger-Woman's Prayer", Ao takes up one of the most common beliefs amongst the Naga tribes. Kire has also referred to this legend in many of her stories. In fact, the novella, *Don't Run, My Love* (2017) is about the legend of *tekhumevimia*. In the story, Pfenuo explains to her daughter that a *tekhumevimia* is both man and tiger. She says, "They have a foot each in both worlds…they say that the man is the body and the tiger is the soul. Some say they can interchange at will" (92-93). In the poem, Temsula Ao presents the predicament of a woman who has inherited the tiger spirit. It shows that the inheritor has no choice "Since grandfather's tiger-soul/Came un-bidden to take control." She pleads, the "powers above" to "Pity my human plight/And enable me, just this once /To renounce these/Other selves" (249). Through this poem Ao is able to present the feelings of the human who is not thrilled to

inherit such a legacy because she desires to live a normal life. The poet brings to attention how the human aspect of the one who has inherited the tiger spirit is carelessly disregarded as people focus only in the mystery that surround such stories. It is a reminder to the readers or more specifically the Nagas who believe in the existence of such people amongst them even today to have empathy.

In continuation with the theme of reassessment of culture and tradition, another interesting poem in the collection is "Trophies" which is based on the famous Naga tradition of head hunting. The Naga forefathers placed great honour and prestige on the head takers who were elevated to the status of heroes. In this poem, Ao presents a new perspective, "In words of new/ Discernment/ To augment the lore/ Of our essential core" (239). It is the women's side of story which has always been neglected in the process of glorification of hero warriors that she gives a voice to:

'You may rejoice over your bloody trophies
But enemy heads will never fill
My child's empty belly,
Nor quench my need for a body
Untainted by another's blood...
And if you do not heed me
I may soon return to my parents
A widow and your son
The orphan of an irresponsible father.' (286)

Through this poem, Ao again manages to make Naga people think beyond the legends and blind glorification associated with their warrior ancestors and their macho heritage. She makes the readers realize that there is another aspect to the history of Naga head hunters which is the real lived experience of the people like the wife of a warrior who

had to deal with everyday issues of survival like feeding hungry children, taking care of aged parents while at the same time worrying for the life of her warrior husband.

Thus, by placing the Naga people and their worldview at the center, Kire and Ao introduces readers to a new genre of writing which is the Writings in English from Nagaland. At the same time, their handling of themes based on Naga history, tradition and culture is clearly not of glorification and romanticization. In fact, their narratives could be described as one that opens up opportunities to the readers, especially the Naga readers to engage in critical and healthy discourse around one's own culture and tradition which otherwise is impermissible in most of the Naga communities.

Conclusion: Creative Writing as a Medium for Documentation and a Mode of Dissemination

It could be concluded that Writings in English from Nagaland was birthed and nurtured by Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, two women writers from Nagaland. At the same time, they also used creative writing as an important site for preservation as is seen throughout their works where they ensure a rich documentation of Naga tradition, culture, folklore and history. Their works encourage critical examination, interrogation and interpretation of various historical events as well as the intricacies of traditional practices that define a Naga instead of blindly commemorating and upholding them. It is these features that lend Writings in English from Nagaland its distinctiveness. The same, if written in the form of non-fiction for pure academic purpose would be limited only to scholars and fail to generate and sustain interest amongst all types of readers. In addition, by writing in English they have managed to reach out to a wide range of audience and with

their works being translated not only into Indian languages but also into several foreign languages, stories about the people of Nagaland have found vast readership. Thus, by writing in the English language, Kire and Ao manage to use the most powerful tool of subversion in postcolonial literature effectively, and by foregrounding Naga way of life in their writings, successfully place the decentered native back into the center which is the fundamental aim of postcolonialism.

Notes

1. Avinuo Kire is the author of *The Power to Forgive and Other Stories* (Zubaan, 2015), *Where Wildflowers Grow* (Barkweaver Publications, 2015), *The Last Light of Glory Days: Stories from Nagaland* (Speaking Tiger, 2021) and coauthored *Naga Heritage Centre Peoples Stories: Volume One* (PenThrill Publication House, 2016). She has also contributed to the anthology, *The Many That I Am* (Zubaan, 2019).
2. Emisenla Jamir has authored an anthology of poetry, *Loneliness is an Orange* (Barkweaver Publications, 2018). She has contributed her writings to *Raconteurs from the Hills* (PenThrill Publication House, 2014), *The Many That I Am* (Zubaan, 2019) and *Woven Words* (Heritage Publishing House, 2017).
3. Neikehienuo Mepfhu-o has written a collection of short stories, *My Mother's Daughter* (Heritage Publishing House, 2019) and contributed to the anthology, *The Many That I Am* (Zubaan, 2019).

4. Sentilong Ozukum is the author of *Campus Blues: Love, Friendship and Beyond* (Heritage Publishing House, 2010), *Sincerely Yours* (Heritage Publishing House, 2017), *Dreams & Chaos* (Heritage Publishing House, 2020) and *The Case of Longti Village* (Bookipedia Publications, 2021).

5. T. Keditsu is a poet. Her publications include two anthologies of poetry, *Sopfünuo* (Heritage Publishing House, 2018) and *Wake* (PenThrill Publication House, 2019). She has contributed poems to *Woven Words* (Heritage Publishing House, 2017) and *The Many That I Am* (Zubaan, 2019).

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