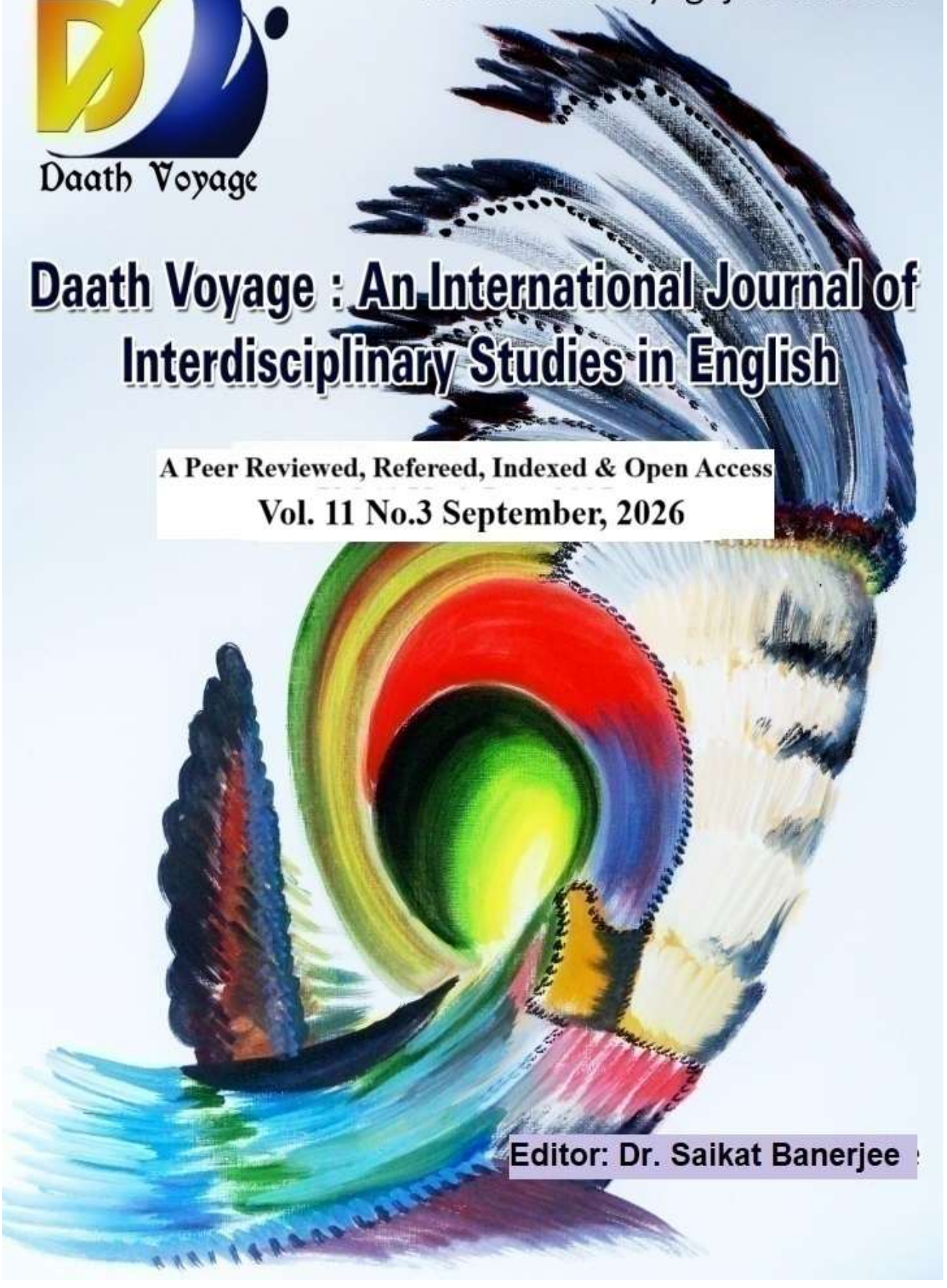
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Decolonising the History and Reconstructing the Naga Identity in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father*

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Abstract: *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* is a foundational work of Naga literature dealing with the socio-political and cultural crisis. It is the first novel of Naga literature written in English, authored by Easterine Kire exploring the themes of decolonisation and cultural identity of Naga community through the depiction of pre-colonial integrity and colonial violence and disruption. The paper aims at examining the misrepresented discourse by the colonizers about the socio-political and cultural nuances and intricacies that existed in the Naga culture before the advent of colonizers and Christian missionaries. Naga culture based on orality and memory tends to re-examine the culturally biased colonial narrative that represents Naga people as barbaric, violent, and uncivilized. The objective of this study is to analyse how Kire challenges to deconstruct the colonial ideologies, using the postcolonial framework of subaltern historiography and the lens of memory and orality.

Keywords: Naga identity, historical consciousness, imperialism, cultural erosion and dislocation, decolonization.

Historical Context

Set against the historical backdrop of the period spanning from 1832 to 1880 at the village of khonama consisting of many villages, the novel chronicles the struggles of the Angami warriors against the encroachment of the Britishers who reached and annexed the land of Naga community into the regime of their own empire. It encapsulates the subsequent effects on native people of Nagaland who had to go through the traumatic phases of life for the constant raids and attacks by the outsiders. The novel delineates an account of the story and history of native people who fortified their strength, came forward, and fought against the colonial intrusion that tried to bring havoc and rift among the Naga community. Kire through her delineation of the story of struggles comprising the conflict, fear, sacrifice, surrender, and resilience from the side of Naga people, illustrates their doggedness in order to protect their cultural identity from

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the erasure under the pressure of colonial influence. Kire tends to focus on retrieving the past memory for reinterpreting the mystified historical narratives documented by the colonial officials with biases and prejudices about the suppressed voices of the Naga people. After the forceful intrusion the colonizers designated the people of the Angami community at Khonama, one of the most fortified villages, to be subaltern by turning them as paid labourers for the fulfilment of colonial predetermined goals. The villagers resisted several attacks of the British who couldn't subjugate them. Out of frustration and rage against the villagers, the British people had a diplomatic contact with the political agent Damanant who assured them of capturing the land of khonama. Several attacks were wrecked on the villagers but they didn't shrink and surrender as they were accompanied and rapported by the neighbouring villages. Damanant sent a proposal of negotiation and was thinking of alternatives to crush the village for paralyzing the second thought of uprising from the warriors of khonama. On the other hand, warriors are opposed to the idea of negotiation " We are not going to be coolies anymore for the white men (106).

Theoretical Perspectives

Colonization as a systematic source for structural racism, prejudice, and inequality persists because Western society constantly fails to recognise and acknowledge it. Decolonizing is a process that starts with identifying and analysing the unequal power relations. When the subject matter is history, it must have to be observed as a discourse, an ideological object that has an owner. Historiography by the colonizer during colonization and the elite historians after the end of colonial period has been highly interpreted and critiqued by the subaltern historians who bring forth the attention of the readers to the prejudices and biasness in the process of writing history. Using the lens of subaltern historiography, the study aims at interpreting and reinterpreting the novels of Easterine Kire and reveals the narratives of misrepresentation about the lives and condition of Naga people at khonama. Guha is of the opinion that the people living in the periphery or at isolation, and away from the touch and traces of mainstream politics, have their own body of politics which contributes to the formation of their own identity and culture and of the nation. He contradicts the idea of a 'narrative of events' which was produced by the heads of the districts under the supervision of colonial masters. This narrative was used as a casual explanation in the west to arrive at what its practitioners believed to be the historical truth (3). Thiong'o argues that colonial language reduces the power of mind, memory and thinking capacity that are essentially connected with language. Losing

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one's language means losing your identity. He propagated the approach of embracing African local languages in writing fiction and non fiction.

Decolonising History

For the retrieving, revival, and reinventing of the past, history plays an important role for indigenous people. Many indigenous writers argue that history is told from the perspective of the colonizers concluding the fact that critiquing history of the colonizers about indigenous knowledge system and practice is a way of retrieving the original version of history of the marginalized. It proves that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonisation. (Smith 29). According to the critique of history by poststructuralist thinkers, history is not linear, structured, and objective. Jacque Derrida views history as human constructed, shaped by language, power, and ever changing social structure. Feminists argue over the prejudice and biases implied through the discourse of patriarchy and conclude that history is the story of a specific form of domination, namely of patriarchy, literally 'his-story' (29). Postcolonial literature in India is so rich and diverse that it has witnessed a great transformation over a period of few decades, primarily dominated by key writers of mainstream narratives whose works have contributed significantly to the process of decolonisation of Indian literature bearing the discourse of the colonial masters. Edward *Said's Orientalism* (1978) is the hallmark of postcolonial literature and theory that serves as a critique of examining the misinterpreted and mystified discourse by the West about the stereotypes of the diverse cultures of the East. Said's idea of elaborating and reinterpreting the falsified ideas and images of the West about the East has greatly influenced many Indian writers to debunk the stereotype and hierarchy perpetuated by the colonial discourse. *Midnight Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, a historical fiction dealing with colonial histories of India's freedom struggle, illustrates a hybrid space through the contestation of colonial narratives. Hybrid space shows a mode of resistance against dominant power structure, allowing the emergence of multiple voices. Kire's approach to writing historical fiction is quite similar to the writers of postcolonial literature as she revisits the historical past of the peripheral people whose voices remain unheard, unregistered, and unrecognised. Following the tradition of bottom to top approach of the subaltern historians she attempts to bring forth the voices silenced for the indifferent attitudes and gaze of the mainstream writers.

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Political Oppression and Colonization of the Mind

The novel centres around the political battle between the Naga community and the British at the village of khonama surrounded by deep, dark and thick jungles, where a cluster of Naga communities used to live together with their pre-colonial norms, rituals, and ethnic code of conduct. Khonoma was defended by the formidable entrance to the village of Mezoma located in the east and turned into a strong natural fortress by the sheer rock face. But the encroachment of the stranger into their peaceful land turns into a regime of disruption, displacement, disorder, violence, control, and manupulation.The ancestral territory becomes the target of trespassers who take the charge of controlling, regulating, and dominating the original inhabitants. The village of khonama surrounded by the Angami communities, is strongly fortified by the disciplinary body of Angami warriors who were powerful, proud, and trained to protect their own land, people, and indigenous culture from sudden and inauspicious attacks of outside enemies. They didn't surrender to the clutches of the colonizers who tried to erase the existence, essence and beauty of the Angami culture and identity when they failed to dominate their rule and control over the local people through several attacks. Home becomes a space of political domination and cultural hegemony of the colonisers. The Britishers didn't foil their mission of establishing themselves as the masters of the colonized people who began to internalize the idea that the colonial masters are always superior to them. The idea of internalising the colonizers as superior resulting in the extension of imperialism in the sacred land of Northeast India led them to establish a master-slave relationship which Hegel termed as master-slaved dialectic in his book *Phenomenology of Spirit.* It was a reverie for the locals that they were bound to work as the unpaid laborers in their own land under the domination of the civilising machine.

Erasure of Indigenous Cultural Identity

Kire has de-essentialized the imagined narratives of the colonial officials in order to save the rifted and wrecked ethnic identity and culture through the deliberate description of the immolation of the Angami warriors. The continuous invasion over the native people of Angami community by the colonial force not only erased cultural and community based life patterns, manners, and attitudes but also left them disrupted, dislocated, and vulnerable. Alongside the complete domination of colonizers, there came Christian Baptist missionaries who didn’t confront any serious resistant force in establishing and utilising their missionary goals over the local people who were left scared and terrified physically, mentally and psychologically. Before the arrival of the colonizers, adherence to the cultural code of conduct set by the worthy, old aged,

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and respected members of the community was a significant symbol of meaningful life for individuals as well as the community of indigenous people. Avoiding greed, having no access to extravagant life, overcoming idleness, getting involved with social obligation, having been content with limited share of material access are the necessary rules and lessons of measurement for the better and dignified life of people. In the novel, Kire through the depiction of character Levi who is the only person witnessing all the historical raids, wars, violence, and drastic changes brought about by the conflict between traditional life of the Naga community and modernity of the colonial education. Levi joined male dormitory system when he was in his childhood and learned and ingrained a community based disciplined life which fortified the life of Levi with patience, power, and resilience to resist the several raids and attacks to his own village by the outside enemies. The commencement of Missionary education with the assistance of the Britishers began to disrupt the indigenous knowledge and practice that sustained the cultural identity of the community by harvesting the seed of modernity. The internal conflict among the naga people regarding their own religious faith and educational system was so steep and rifted that Levi began to suffer from a dilemma when he could not resist his own son Sato from converting to christianity. He started blaming himself for the decision of sending his son Sato as he considers himself to be a foil to his own diplomatic mission of knowing the knowledge system of domination administered by the colonial masters to subjugate the minds of his own community's people. Sato's surrender to Christian missionary education did not mean a complete submission to the reformative colonial system of education as it allowed him to follow old religious practice. This contested space can be compared to the concept of Homi K Bhabha who terms it as a 'third space' which is a site of resistance for the marginalized people. But Levi took it as a claim of total surrender to colonial domination reaching to the conclusion that erosion of cultural identity meant a great blunder and cultural shock for the community people who are merely the witness of bearing the burden of colonial discourse.

Oral Memory as Counter History

Naga literature, not appearing as a written form for centuries due to the unwritten scripts and language intricacies of the Government Policies and Act, draws the attention and enthusiasm of the readers towards the undocumented narratives based on orality and memory. Memory is an integral part of documenting what is lost and unrecorded in written narratives, serving as a residue of preserving the unheard and lost voices of the subaltern people. Kire in her fiction and non-fiction follows the tradition of documenting the

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indigenous knowledge and practices, giving importance to the individual as well as collective memories of the community people who have witnessed and undergone the experiences. It is the dormitory system that serves as an archive of the past history and stories passed down by the elder members of the community who teach the younger minds with a sense of harmony, unity and integrity. Evenings at the dormitory are exciting times when the young boys of the peer group exchange stories and listen to the teachings of their mentor who commands "If you are at a community feast and take more than two pieces of meat, shame on you…This is the key to right living – avoiding excess in anything – be content with your share of land and fields... Every individual has a social obligation to the village...." (Kire 30). The elders of the community through their oral narratives used to sustain their belief in animistic faith by sharing some strange tales about the mysterious power of the spirits. Memory of the past works as a mode of resistance in adversity as it convinced Lato, younger brother of the main protagonist Levi who was at that time imprisoned. He recalls the past struggle of his mother who had struggled to bring up her sons alone as a young widow and pass sleepless nights at the time of her husband's death. Lato's refusal to marry reflects a deep affection for his mother. The reference to cultural rituals and taboo like 'terhunyi', 'sekrenyi', and 'genna day' performed by the community people at regular intervals with worship,care, and honour is suggestive of the fact that they never forget to celebrate the sacred festivals which sanctify people from many evil powers. At the time of danger impending, Levi shows his dedication to the traditional festivals by commencing " Just now, we have more important things to worry about than war.The harvest is not far off and after that, the 'Terhunyi' and then the 'Sekrenyi'.I don't think think our village will forgo the festivals and go on the warpath" (79).

Reconstructing Naga Identity

Ranajit Guha, the Indian author of subaltern historiography argues that under the complete surrender of colonizers, the identity of the colonized was imposed on them by those who had power over them by their class, caste, race, ethnicity, and official standing. The colonized people learnt to recognise themselves not by the properties and attributes of their own social beings but by a diminution of those who were of their superiors (18). Angami people had been living in their peaceful land with unity of diversity. Although they are known as a war monging tribe, they believe in disciplined and dignified life. The unity in diversity is reflected among the communities of many villages through their close association, rapport, and resistance against the encroachment of the colonizer who forcefully intruded into their sacred land and

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tried to erase their socio-political, ethnic and economic structures. Kire believes that the Angami tribe is the most powerful tribe among all other tribes in Nagaland, bearing the pride of their historical background and ancestry.They are the saviours of their own land, rituals, belief, faith, kinship, familial and social structure and power relation. Before the arrival of the Britishers into their land, there was no proper written scripture revealing the fact that they used to pass their story and historical narratives through conversation, dialogue, memory, oral narratives, and the performance of rituals. Story telling is a crafty art to the elders of the community who play a crucial role to pass their own stories to the younger generation. It is evident from most of the narratives of Kire that there is no concept of heroism. The native ordinary people are the speakers performing heroic duties and playing the role of passing the story to the younger generation when they are old enough. The dormitory system is an old practice which sustains the glory of old aged tradition of the Angami community as it consists of many skillful training and rituals which make the Angami male citizens aware of their obligation and duty to their own community from childhood to manhood. It is male oriented centre where the boys of the community have to participate through their own ritualistic way. The elders of the tribe execute the role of passing the stories to the younger about warfare skills, hunting, resisting enemies, craftsmanship, community building, and other necessary rituals and manners.

Use of Colonial Language as a Resistance Tool

English as a language like French and Portuguese after the spreading of colonial imperialism across the world began to dominate and supersede the local languages of different cultures and communities. It was considered to be the natural language of literary and even political mediation, having a capacity to unite the people of multiple communities against their divisive tendencies inherent in the multiplicities of their languages within the same geographic state.The act of integrating all the African languages by the colonizer appeared as an unsolicited gift to the African people as they with gratitude accepted the English language as a rescue. In this context Chinua Achebe in 1964, in a speech entitled ‘The African Writer and the English Language’ said: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intended to use it” (102). Later on, Thingo contradicted Chinua Achebe’ s choice of writing fiction and non-fictions of African sense and sensibilities in a language of coloniser instead of writing in African local languages. He has considered Achebe’s act of writing in English as a bourgeoisie as it captured the tradition of the rich people of Africa. The colonizer had enforced their

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cultural hegemony and domination over the colonized by erasing the indigenous cultural practices and identity, making English as the language of power and political control. The erosion and replacement of the pop indigenous language by the dominant language of the coloniser means not only the loss of indigenous culture but is an act of psychological violence on the colonized people. They are fragmented, disoriented, and disintegrated from their own cultural unity and integrity among the communities. Kire, being brought up with Indian blood in physique and English language in mind and thought has significantly contributed to the process of decolonisation by appropriating the language of the colonial masters. In the novel, Kire uses English language as the medium of transcribing historical and oral memory of her own ethnic community from an insider's perspective. Kire's attempt of appropriating the English language by giving priority to the perspective experienced by the native people of the Angami community shows her sincerity and a sense of duty to debunk the colonial perspective that defines people of Nagaland as rebel, violent, insurgent, and barbaric. This is how Kire has tried to experiment a world language through the process of de-essentializing the entitlement of the stereotype of the native people. The use of many ethnic words, idioms, proverbs with English language in different contexts for conveying the exact meaning appreciated by community people is suggestive of the fact that English language works as a counter-discourse.

Conclusion

The representation of indigenous voices in the novel serves as an act of bringing forth historical consciousness, claiming the past of pre-colonial integrity. The close reading of the novel demonstrates how the historical narratives of the colonial masters represented the indigenous people of Nagaland as mystic, savage and uncivilized. Writing the novel itself is a deliberate act of resisting the colonizers' pre-planned act of distorting, erasing and subordinating the indigenous experiences. Instead of following the traditional method of recovering and reinterpreting history she chooses to focus on the subaltern approach for documenting the silenced voices. Contradicting the historical narratives imposed on the indigenous people by the intruders who sought to wipe out the cultural identity by leveling them as inferior. Here the novelist attempts to reconstruct their subaltern identity by revisiting the historical past. Kire's approach of writing back in fiction as a vehicle for decolonizing the history of the colonial masters means getting back cultural identity which is inseparable from Historical reclamation.

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