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When words reclaim heritage: Naga Identity and Cultural Documentation in Easterine Kire's: When the River Sleeps

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Abstract

This paper presents literature from the North-East region as a crucial medium to assert their distinct identities and resist cultural assimilation. By voicing their experiences and histories through literature, the people of the North-East seek to counter the misrepresentation and marginalization they have faced historically. Within the premise that North-Eastern literature embodies a resounding voice of resistance, emerging from the profound need to preserve and assert distinct identities, this paper delves into the subtle layers of identity construction and preservation within Naga society as depicted in Easterine Kire's novel "When The River Sleeps."

Keywords: North-East literature, identity reconstruction, documentation

Introduction

The North-Eastern region of India is known for its diverse cultures, languages, and histories, which have often been marginalized in the larger narrative of Indian literature. This region, comprising eight states often referred to as the "Seven Sisters" along with Sikkim, is nestled between the Himalayas and Southeast Asia. Its diverse topography, ranging from lush forests to rugged hills, has contributed to the development of distinct cultural identities over centuries. However, despite its richness, the North-Eastern region has often been marginalized in the broader narrative of Indian history and culture. Maaker & Joshi (2007) ^[2] observes that; "the north-eastern region seldom makes headlines" while also highlighting that "nationwide surveys by popular news magazines such as India Today and Outlook sometimes omit the Northeast altogether". Ramthai & Mili (2018) ^[6] has also noted that; "There has always been a tendency to stereotype the Northeast as a troubled and violent zone. Two broad approaches to this stereotyping are noticed: Firstly, The romantic; foregrounding its pristine nature, its landscape and its cultural richness. Secondly, the politics; focusing on its turmoil, violence and social and political instability". This marginalization has its roots in various historical factors. During the colonial era, the British established indirect rule in many parts of the region, often using divide-and-rule strategies that resulted in the fragmentation of the region's unity. Post-independence, limited connectivity and economic development, combined with a lack of understanding in the rest of India about the region's cultures, have further exacerbated its marginalization.

This marginalization has led to a sense of cultural erosion and loss, as the region's languages, traditions, and way of life have often been overshadowed or misunderstood. Literature became a powerful tool for resisting this erosion, as writers and poets turned to their craft to document, celebrate, and protect their indigenous traditions, folklore, rituals, and languages. Literature became a tool and a vehicle for a creative resistance that is imbued with a strong and an urgent sense of identity assertion. According to Misra (2011) ^[5], "An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with 'other' cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the north-eastern states". This assertion is often rooted in the need to preserve and promote the diverse cultural heritage of the North-east, which has faced marginalization and misrepresentation in the larger Indian narrative. Nestled within the intricate tapestry of the North-eastern region, Nagaland is one of the sister states in the region that generates literature resonating with a profound yearning to recapture

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a vanishing past and a resolute determination to proclaim its authentic identity to the world. Within such a backdrop, the paper presents a discourse on literature as a powerful tool of resistance and identity assertion in the North-Eastern region, particularly in the state of Nagaland. It presents how literature has become a viable medium for the documentation of oral traditions, folklore, rituals, and languages that might otherwise be lost over time. The paper presents a case study of Easterine Kire's "When The River Sleeps" to further augment the claim.

North- East Literature as a tool for resistance

Literature serves as a profound vessel for preserving and celebrating indigenous traditions, folklore, rituals, and languages. In the North-Eastern region, where diverse cultures have historically been marginalized, literature acts as a repository of cultural heritage. Writers and poets often draw upon their community's oral traditions, myths, and rituals, weaving them into narratives that not only entertain but also educate. "They narrate the tales or legacies of traditions which are carried down from generation to generation, cherished and considered as immensely sacred. These oral traditions form the basis of most of the modern literature produced from the Northeast" (Shah & Chaudhury, 2022) ^[7]. Literature becomes a potent tool for countering cultural erosion in the face of historical marginalization. The North-Eastern region has faced attempts at cultural assimilation and erasure, particularly during colonial rule. Literature provides a means of resistance against this erosion by reasserting the distinct identity of the region.

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Furthermore, literature challenges stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated by outsiders. It offers an authentic depiction of life in the North-East, dismantling preconceived notions and revealing the complexities of the people's experiences. "The sense of being denied fair representation in the great Indian civilizational discourse or even in the nationalist discourse, has deeply affected the emerging literati of many of the regions of north-east India in the post-Independence era" (Misra, 2011) ^[5]. This accurate representation, often absent from mainstream narratives, serves to debunk myths and present the North-Eastern identity in its true light.

As a mode of creative expression, literature empowers writers to assert their identities unapologetically. By sharing stories that reflect the struggles, triumphs, and aspirations of their communities, writers embolden readers to embrace their own cultural roots. "Literature helps in reconstructing identity and representing the voice that has been silenced throughout times. For a region marred by decades of violence, its literature is a medium of telling stories to the world" (Buragohain, 2017) ^[1]. This process not only instills pride but also fosters a sense of unity among different communities within the North-Eastern region. In essence, literature in the North-East becomes a vehicle of resistance by preserving heritage, reinforcing languages, challenging cultural erosion, and amplifying the region's authentic identity. Through its narratives, literature paints a vivid

portrait of a region that refuses to be silenced, showcasing its resilience and celebrating its diversity.

Easterine Kire's when the River Sleeps

This section of the paper introduces the selected text to be used as the cornerstone for validating the assertion that literature is a pivotal medium in shaping the identity of Naga Society. The text under examination is "When the River Sleeps," a novel authored by Easterine Kire, a prominent Naga poet and writer. Kire stands as a prominent figure in the realm of Naga writers writing in English, acknowledged for her literary prowess. Notably, she holds the distinction of being among the pioneering Naga novelists and stands as the sole Naga writer and poet to secure a literary award.

Published in 2014, the novel, "When The River Sleeps" forms the central focus of this paper. This novel stands as a testament to the mounting significance of literature in the Naga society's journey of identity reclamation. The narrative delves into the alluring quest of capturing the heart-stone from a slumbering river—a pursuit believed to bestow immense power, including wealth, prowess, and success in love and war. The narrative unfolds as an array of experiences that transcend physical and metaphysical realms, offering a glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of the Nagas. With every twist and turn, Kire reinforces the intricate interplay between myths, identity, and the captivating landscapes of Naga society.

Analysis of the text

The novel *When the River Sleeps* can be seen as a historical document as it documents the dying culture of the Nagas. It is a novel that deals with the Naga way of life, their myths and folk-tales. As the protagonist embarks on his quest to find the heart-stone, the readers are forced to travel alongside him and witness the same encounters hence, reliving the dying traditions, practices and myths resulting out of the intrusion of modernization. Through Vilie's journey, the author submerges the readers into the mythical realm of the rich Naga past and history and forces the Naga readers to rethink their position in their world of tensions and conflict between their cultural roots and modernization. Right from the outset, Vilie's introspection draws us into his heartrending recollections of his departed lover, Mechüseno. Within this narrative fabric, the story of Seno becomes inextricably interwoven with the deep cultural beliefs that define the essence of Naga society. The narrative informs that Seno's passing was attributed to a spiritual influence and was consequently buried outside the village gate. "Any clan member dying after encountering a spirit could not be buried within the village" (Kire, p. 5). The Naga people have a notion that if any member of the clan died out of the ominous circumstances, it is not good for the villagers to bury such person within the village. Therefore, as Seno died in 'ominous circumstances' she was buried outside the village gate.

Another significant aspect of the novel is the way Vilie derives his identity from his father, Kedo. Vilie always addresses himself in relation to his father saying 'I am known as Vilie, my father was Kedo, the headman of the village' (Kire, p. 36). This is considered important because the Nagas, being a patrilineal society, men are considered the carriers of clan identity and ancestry. Hence, by pronouncing the name of his father, he is introducing the

clan from which his identity stems. He represents himself as well as his clan by addressing his lineage.

However, while Vilie confidently states his identity within his own village, he is dubbed the 'hunter who lives a solitary life' (Kire 36), a label rooted in the tales that travel from village to village. In these narratives, his personal history and background fade into obscurity, and his identity becomes a mosaic of stories woven by others. This dichotomy resonates with the broader context of Nagaland, wherein the true essence of Naga identity is gradually becoming akin to a fading memory. Much like Vilie's endeavor to affirm his lineage, the larger Naga community is engaged in an ongoing struggle to assert its cultural identity within the expansive cultural landscape. The current identity, ascribed to the Nagas by external forces, lacks the depth and nuances that come with an understanding of authentic indigenous history. The prevailing image is often a mere projection, bereft of profound insights into the complex nature of Naga heritage.

The next significant aspect of the novel unfolds as Vilie enters the Nettle forest, where the art of 'bark weaving' is given light through his encounter with a group of women engaged in harvesting Nettle plants to craft bark cloth. In this significant interaction, the author skillfully sheds light on the history of bark weaving, particularly through Idele, an expert, who shares the ancestral wisdom behind their harvesting traditions. Idele adeptly imparts the technique of fiber extraction for yarn, the optimal timing for nettle collection, and the nuanced variations in nettle species across villages. This treasury of knowledge, bequeathed by her grandmother and intended for transmission to her niece, serves as a testament to the continuum of Zeliang women's legacy. By beckoning Vilie to partake in this 'dying art', the author invites readers into an intimate engagement with the profound act of preservation.

This encounter not only sheds light on the artistry of tradition but also unveils an unforeseen consequence – the evolution of language acquisition. The historical trading systems, built upon barter, compelled traders to engage in direct communication with counterparts from other villages. Consequently, linguistic adaptation became an integral facet of this intricate web of exchange, obliging these traders to acquire the languages of the villages they traded with. As this revelation surfaces, the narrative casts a multifaceted light on the nexus between commerce, culture, and communication, unraveling a hidden strand in the fabric of Naga society's evolution.

An additional instance within the novel that intricately addresses the construction of identity is the reference to the traditional practice of burying the "umbilical cord" at one's ancestral place of origin. The declaration, "Our umbilical cords are buried here and we would always be restless if we tried to settle elsewhere" (Kire, p. 88) encapsulates this belief, symbolizing a connection between physical lineage and geographical roots. The act of burying the umbilical cord is laden with symbolism, signifying the reverence accorded to this intimate connection. This ritual also finds resonance in the practice of burying deceased family members within one's own land, a practice guided by the notion that identity is eternally entwined with the land of one's lineage. Rooted in the belief that identity emanates from the very cellular fabric, this idea resonates deeply within Naga culture, reflecting a profound and protective sense of identity. This cultural practice reverberates in

contemporary times, where the umbilical cord of a newborn delivered in a hospital is carried home and buried there. This practice embodies the essence of being deeply rooted, forging ancestral connections that define a sense of belonging and kinship. In the fabric of Naga society, these connections are as vital as the air one breathes; they sustain life and purpose. This sentiment resonates strongly within a social context, where human existence thrives on connections and interdependencies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novel "When The River Sleeps" by Easterine Kire reveals profound insights into the construction and preservation of identity. Through the character of Vilie, the narrative explores the layers of Naga identity, drawing parallels between individual experiences and the broader context of a society deeply rooted in its cultural heritage. The symbolism of Vilie as both a guardian and a seeker mirrors the Naga people's continuous quest to safeguard their identity while navigating the complexities of a changing world.

The novel attests to the power of literature as a medium of resistance and assertion. Just as Naga writers craft narratives to counter misrepresentation and cultural erosion, Vilie's journey becomes a metaphor for the Naga people's determination to reclaim their narrative from the clutches of misinterpretation. Vilie's relationship with his father mirrors the Naga societal structure, where patrilineal bonds and ancestral roots are central to identity. Similarly, the preservation of practices like burying the umbilical cord emphasizes the Naga people's unwavering connection to their land, culture, and history. These practices not only serve as a means of maintaining identity but also showcase their adaptive strength in a changing world. In the broader context of the North-Eastern region, where diverse cultures have faced historical marginalization, the preservation of identity through literature, traditions, and intimate practices like the ones explored in the novel, becomes an act of resilience and empowerment.

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