

Performing Memory through Storytelling in Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights*

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Nagaland, one of the eight states which together constitute the Northeast, has always been a region of conflict and unrest in the post-independent India. Naga state continues to be a state of violence and the people have gone through the trauma associated with it. Memory plays an important role in helping the individual to remember and recreate the past experiences which are traumatic. Their agony and grief is best captured through storytelling and Easterine Kire, one of the most prolific writers of northeast, has used memory as a tool to define and shape Naga culture and their life. In a place like Nagaland, to unearth their history, which has not been documented, the most influential methodology of narration is performing memory. The present paper studies how Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* performs and creates memories through storytelling in an attempt to recreate and imagine the popular unconscious.

Key words: memory, performance, Naga culture, storytelling, trauma

Memories are part of a larger process of cultural negotiation which makes them fluid, cultural and at the same time personal. Astrid Erll argues that "Storytelling is per definition an act of 'memory', in the broad sense proposed by Augustine, namely an act of connecting the temporal levels of past, present and future" (213). Hence remembering becomes active reconciliation of past and the present. It is performance rooted in the lived experience of an individual.

Sukalpa Bhattacharya in her essay “Narratives as An /Other History or His /Story Otherwise” says, “It is through fiction memoirs, testimonies, individual and collective memories that one could weave together the fragments of the moment” (20). Memory is life; it is remembering and forgetting simultaneously. It is a bond tied to the present. It is multiple, plural, collective yet individual. Through her writings, Easterine Kire opens a new perspective and methodology in storytelling to recollect and reimagine the memories and oral traditions of Naga life.

Storytelling is the essence of folk culture. Like every culture, storytelling is a quintessential part of the growing up experience of every person in the tribal community. Indigenous people collect their knowledge from their surroundings, through careful observation of nature. They learn and get experience from the physical world as well as the world of spirit. It is a knowledge based on their tribal life, dreams, visions and signs. This knowledge is passed down to generation after generation through oral narratives. It imparts knowledge, cultural, moral and historic literacy to the young generations.

Jana Scigulinska in her essay “Oral Traditions in Native American and Australian Aboriginal Culture” says,

Oral tradition and storytelling represent a crucial part of all indigenous cultures to an extent that many contemporary writers of indigenous origin after years of silence have been striving to incorporate many key elements of oral traditional storytelling into their writings not only to preserve them but also to make them understandable for contemporary generation of native and also non-native readers. (Scigulinska 116)

Orality is one of the most important aspects of Kire’s writings to remember her homeland. The oral traditions from which Kire is inspired are what N Scott Momady calls, “traditions by which myths, legends, tales and lores of people are formulated, communicated and preserved in language by word of mouth as opposed to writing” (136). The orality of language is permanent and Naga society which is based on oral narratives uses various aspects of this tradition to remember and recreate memory. The communities use storytelling as a

strengthening process to remember and reweave their culture. In the *Spirit Nights*, Beshang, the seer, becomes the self-appointed story teller.

After the community meal, Beshang told them this story: There was once a village of ten warriors feared by all other villages feuding against them. They were undefeated in battle and the word spread that their valour came from the fact that they were half-man, half-spirit (37).

Tola, the powerful female protagonist amidst a patriarchal society of *Spirit Nights*, receives prophecies and visions in her dream. Her memory is jogged by the story she has heard in her childhood. Tiger, man and spirit were once brothers and tiger was always jealous of man. One day a tiger committed a taboo and they could no longer live together as one family and they took separate ways. Tiger went to woods; man went to the open plains and spirit to the spirit world. Tiger from that day onwards wanted to eat the sun and when the light was gone, he planned to eat all Man's children. Darkness would engulf the whole place when the tiger ate the sun. This childhood memory of the story kept haunting Tola. She recalls this vision which brings fierceness and stillness to everyday life. "As she watched, a giant tiger leaped out into the sky and began to eat the sun. Tola screamed silently at the sight but it would not stop until it had finished its meal. When it was over, a great darkness fell upon the village" (47).

Kire uses storytelling as a methodology to relive the forgotten traditions and culture of Naga tribes. It revives the cultural past, attempts to excavate and at the same time comprehend the history of indigenous Naga life. *Spirit Nights* is inspired by the story of darkness narrated by the Chang Naga tribe. The narration unravels how the Naga community is guided by taboos and spiritual beliefs. When a taboo or custom is breached in the spirit world, darkness engulfs the village. Opening lines of the novel takes us to the imaginary fictional world of spirits.

The drumming could be heard all the way across the valley and well into the next. The men were beating the drum fast and furiously, a beat that any villager would recognise as a warning to return

immediately to the village. They seemed to be competing with darkness that was gathering just as swiftly; it was the great darkness that had descended in the middle of a sunny afternoon and made Namumolo's grandmother exclaims, Tiger has eaten the sun! Tiger has eaten the sun! (1).

The darkness envelops the whole village like an eclipse which covers anything resembling light. "The Tiger has eaten the sun", goes the saying and the whole village is covered with darkness for many days. The villagers are instructed not to step out of their homes lest they get washed away by evil spirits or hungry animals.

Namu was the chosen person who can kill the tiger which has eaten the sun. Namu with his sharpened spear runs to kill the tiger but the giant tiger keeps the mouth open and Namu ran headlong into it. Inside the tiger's mouth there was no darkness. He was taken to a new place, a wonderland, where he saw his father Topong Nyakba, mother Sechang and sisters Noni and Loni. Memories of childhood haunted him. "Sechang continued to carry her son and she began to sing in a soft voice; it was a lullaby that he remembered from his childhood and it soothed him so that he fell asleep right there on her lap inside the opened mouth of the tiger" (120).

The spiritual world of Naga belief finds place in Kire's writings. *Spirit Nights* is the story of the land of spirits which are part of everyday existence of the pre-Christened Naga people, at times sowing fear, and at times bringing light. The mythical tiger and its wide open mouth depict human desire and dreams. The history and realities of Nagas is portrayed in the world of spiritual struggles through wisdom, imagination, magic and adventure. Namu the young boy is trapped in the spirit world. He forgets his life and is immersed in the pleasures and dreams of new life. In the new excitement he forgets his duties and becomes part of the magical life with his father, mother and two sisters. Tola, the grandmother, tries to bring back Namu to the world and she becomes spirit and enters the spirit world. She calls out for Namu, but Namu is reluctant to hear Tola's voice. He is overwhelmed with the love of his dead mother on one side and duty as a village seer and tribe on the other. Namu has to kill the tiger and

come out of the darkness. Tola with her love and commanding voice is successful in bringing back Namu, her grandson, to the Man's world. Namu with all his strength and will power kills the tiger with his spear.

Experience and knowledge from the past is remembered by memories of childhood tales. The midwife asks Namu to name the child as it is born, reminding him of the Naga oral culture of naming the child as soon as it is born, lest it will be carried away by spirits.

Naming was a father's responsibility. Men were expected to be prepared beforehand. It was a father's way of establishing ownership over the child. Tola said to her husband 'He needs a good name. Let us not put off his naming: it would tempt the spirits.' She was referring to the belief that infants without names were more susceptible to being taken off by spirits" (14).

Memories are performed and recreated in the communities through songs, dirges and carry forward the unwritten history of the people. Customs, rituals and beliefs of the Naga community are depicted through the different characters of the story. In the spirit world Chemden, Namu's grandmother gives him a memory ball. It stores memories and helps to recall every memory of the loved ones. It is a rounded object, brown in colour, with ridges and looks like a worm or animal. Namu brings the memory ball to this world and keeps it as a treasure.

It is a memory ball. It stores your memories and you can use it to recall every memory you have ever made with your loved ones. Oh it sounds marvellous. And you want to give it to me? Oh yes I have been waiting for you to show up (119).

In the story *Spirit Nights* Tola's personal experience during the attack of the village by enemies and understanding of the situation is narrated through her memory, It becomes not only the childhood memory of Namu but of all Naga villagers. Namu lost his father, mother and great grandfather in the enemy attack of his village when he was an infant. Namu had heard stories of replacing the log drum of his village. Nagaland is a place of log drum, the largest musical instrument of Naga tribes. It is made out of a single tree and is as important as a seer or a headman of the village. The bigger villages

have bigger log drums and every child of the village knows the sound of log drum. Its duty is announcing public meetings, festivals, warning against enemy attack, war, tiger and sudden outbreak of fire. It is also played to mourn the dying of the moon or sun. “The log drum is our father. It protects us against our enemies and wild animals, “When a log drum becomes rotten, we waste no time debating how to replace it” (56).

Spirit Nights is a story of memory and survival. The memory of attack and loss of people had created pain in the mind of people as “memory of war can be perpetuated through engaging, not dismissing the memory of trauma and pain of the past” (Wilson 259). Kire has created a new way of remembering the past and the present both individual and collective. Erll notes that “... the notion of ‘cultural’ or ‘collective’ memory proceeds from an operative metaphor: the concept of ‘remembering’ ... is metaphorically transferred to the level of culture” (217). Thus collective memory connects the people of a region through the stories and myths that they share. The region’s identity and its version of the past is inextricably linked to each other. Erll, further argues that, “Stories connected with cultural memory tend to give an answer to the question ‘where do we come from?’ This is their formative or identity related aspect” (219). This definitely helps in analysing the stories of Nagaland with a common cultural memory which takes the narrative structure of a traumatic and wounded memory which in turn gives identity to the place. Indigenous cultural practices, tales and storytelling become fictionalized in Kire’s writings when they are re-lived, re-created and transferred to the next generation to bridge the gap between past and present and cultivate cultural and traditional values among young minds.

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