

The Power of Storytelling in Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire's Son of the Thundercloud is an offshoot of Naga oral traditions that construct a narrative of a man-made disaster that follows a natural one that the main character blames on the disappearance of storytellers. Through her masterful intertwining of myth, prophecy, and magical realism, Kire presents a world in which the reclamation of ancestral memory and oral wisdom becomes essential for both personal and communal regeneration. Central to this analysis is the symbolic role of Rhalietuo, the prophesied child, whose birth and death alter preset notions of time, sacrifice, and hope. The text can be read as a critique of colonial modernity and its role in the destruction of Indigenous epistemologies, while simultaneously offering a vision of healing rooted in the same cultural system.

This paper argues that the novella functions as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in the face of cultural erasure and ecological collapse. It situates Kire's work within broader discourses of postcolonial ecocriticism and Indigenous literature, emphasizing the transformative potential of oral myths, now in the written form, as both resistance and renewal.

Keywords: Storytelling, Myth, Naga Culture, Oral Traditions

Easterine Kire's 2016 novel *Son of the Thundercloud* starts with story-telling. An apparently old storyteller tells the story of a woman – 'the saddest person alive in those hills' who had lost her husband and seven sons to a tiger. The grieving woman then begets another son – the son of a thundercloud – who avenges the deaths of 'his father and seven brothers' by killing the tiger. When the obviously young listener asks for details, the narrator responds, "Oh, it happened a very long time. And it will happen again." (Kire 10)

The novel follows the life of Pelevotso, the one born to wander away and not live an insignificant life, unlike what the other villagers want their children to do – not go away. Pelevotso's parents shorten the boy's grandmother-given name to Pele. The novel is richly intertwined with a lot of mini stories. It includes the stories of two deserted villages – one that was infested with mice despite the plentiful harvests and the other that had a clan-clash and "so much blood had been spilt in the village that it became taboo to live there." (13) Pele's story is told briskly – that he leaves the village of his birth – Nialhuo – when his wife, children and parents die in quick succession due to a famine.

Pele becomes a wanderer in search of the mythical Village of Weavers, the only place with enough food and water. He crosses dead and parched lands before meeting two old sisters – the four hundred years old Kethonuo and the other one Siedze, twenty years younger than her elder sister. They report of the famine as running for seven hundred years and that they are waiting for the birth of the son of the thundercloud. "He will bring rain and mist that softens the soil, and the earth will sprout grain and grass again. There will be food and life. This is why we have been kept alive." (19) He watches with them as the stars pull the Earth and change everything in the geographical space while the rest of humanity sleeps. The next day they experience the burst of the first rain in a long time – the seven-hundred-year-old rain that "replenish(es) the earth and all its creatures." (33)

Pele and his two centuries-old hosts rush to the Village of Weavers to meet Mesanuo, the younger sister of the two old ladies. To their surprise, Mesanuo has become pregnant by the single drop of rain that fell in the village. The prophesy of the lady and her mythical son who would avenge the deaths of his family members has come true and Pele, the young listener to the grandmother's story, is now a witness. The next day Mesanuo gives birth to a

baby boy and everything around them changes to mystical green. The headman of the village is as surprised as anyone would be to see the age-old prophesy come true. Mesanuo explains the arrival of her son and the changes in the natural environment around them. "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." (46)

Commenting on the famine, Mesanuo talks of a different type of famine: "I'm 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." (48) The birth of the mystical son has brought back the stories, infused life into the dead stories of the past and has made these fables come true. The river, bone dry the day before, has come back to life and the villagers call it their mother.

The second half of the novel describes the exploits of the new-born child Rhalietuo – Rhalie in short – and his killing of the tiger. Unfortunately for the village and its residents, Rhalie gets killed by an act of jealousy soon after his victory by Viphrü, the headman's son, in a trap set by the latter.

When Pele asks Mesanuo about her time, centuries earlier, she narrates her story.

'... When I first came to live here, the earth was green and fertile. There was food everywhere. No one tilled the fields because there was no need to. We were not preoccupied with field work from dawn to dusk. And there were storytellers who went all over the land telling stories to the people, and spreading joy and hope.'

'Where are they now?'

'Dead. Killed, all killed by the dark ones, those who did not want to transform people's minds with their stories.'

'Why?'

'Because the people sought to be free whenever they heard the stories. Free of fear, free of shame and constant desire. Without the stories, people believed they were destined to suffer, and they allowed the dark ones to enslave their minds and fill them with fear and sorrow and despair until they died.' (63)

This long defence of the storytellers and their artform is a consistent reminder to the readers throughout the novel that without stories, people lose hope and die. The fact that the three sisters lived for centuries, feeding on hope, is a lesson for Pele to seek stories and feed on them. Mesanuo directly points to the killing of the storytellers and their stories as the reason for the decline of life in the region. "So the drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories." (64) She also rears Rhalie to believe that if he dreams about something strong enough, the same will come true. She becomes his storyteller as she herself, without her knowledge, was the daughter of storytellers who hid her identity to protect her from the dark ones.

She had survived to fill his days and nights with hope and wonder. Rhalietuo dreamed of doing brave and wonderful things like the heroes in his mother's stories.

One evening, his mother told him the story of the tiger that had killed a free and fearless man and his seven sons. She never repeated the story. That night he dreamt that he had killed the tiger. (70)

Mesanuo had completed the task assigned to her by the storytellers. She had given birth to the boy of the stories and had fed him with tales including his own – the one in which he kills the tiger. After a few years visiting and living with his aunts in the hills with his mother and Pele, the now energetic young man Rhalie returns to the Village of Weavers for the fulfilment of the prophesy. There he kills the tiger on a hunt and fulfils the purpose of his birth. He becomes a household name, reaching demigod status and becomes the cynosure of the womenfolk. Viphrü tricks him into another hunt and spears him down and creates a story to make it an accidental death.

The villagers mourn the death of their hero but Mesanuo refuses to bury him there among the sinners and takes the body to the abandoned village where her two elder sisters lived. They reach there and find that the two old ladies have passed on. After burying Rhalie's body, Pele and Mesanuo watch the skies to note the birth of a new star – one for Rhalie. At night, Pele sees a vision of the two sisters and Rhalie making a visit and the next morning he finds that Mesanuo too had passed on. Pele

buries her in the hills and walks off carrying the stories of a lifetime with him.

The novel is spun around the stories surrounding Rhalie's life and death. The three sisters who wait for centuries to see the fulfilment of the prophesy are emblematic of the power of stories. Yuval Noah Harari points to storytelling as the superpower that made homo sapiens humans. In an interview to Carmine Gallo, he points to the power of the stories. "The emergence of storytelling 70,000 years ago allowed Sapiens to break out, expand around the world, and to become the most dominant animal of them all." (Gallo) Anne McKeown points to storytelling as the lifeblood of human connection and traces the origin of stories to the beginning of humanity. She also points out to the utilitarian view: "Beyond mere entertainment, storytelling offers a myriad of benefits for both the teller and the listener, weaving a tapestry of shared experiences and profound insights." (McKeown)

This Kire's masterpiece is built around the storytelling traditions of the North-East region in general and Nagaland in particular. In fact, the storyline resembles the story from the North-East that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni uses in her magnum opus *The Mistress of Spices*. "The story has its genesis in traditional knowledge which is a repository of ancient wisdom encoded in mythic folklores." (Vinayakaselvi and Abinaya 1673)

In Kire's narrative, the emphasis on storytelling and the need to protect the tellers from the dark one is a challenge to humanity. As McKeown writes, "in a world

inundated with noise and distractions, storytelling remains a timeless art form that transcends boundaries and enriches lives. No matter where they are shared, stories have the power to connect us, heal us, and inspire us." (McKeown)

Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* is a moving narrative the importance of storytelling in the age of information technology and the predominance of machines over humanity. The author is a defendant for all the authors who had sent their stories into the world for the readers to grasp them and reap the tales and traditions and the oral knowledge system these stories carry with them.

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