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***POLITICS OF NARRATION:
MYTHICAL DISCOURSE IN KIRE'S
SON OF THE THUNDERCLOUD***

Keywords: *Mythical Discourse; storytelling; rational argument; famine; Naga creation myth; ecological responsibility; alternative truth*

Abstract: *Writers are committed to the power of proof, reasoning and technical solutions to every possible problem faced by humanity. Convincing through proof and argument is construed to be the presentation of reality. Sometimes reality is so complex that it is not possible for the narrative to be rational and logical. Climate change induced disasters and famines are a reality today. Easterine Kire, a writer from Nagaland in the North East of India, expresses the pressing concern of climate change and the role of narrative retelling of a Naga creation myth in her novel Son of the Thundercloud (2016). The plot of the novel is the journey of Pele, a man who lost his family and happiness due to a devastating famine. His journey leads him to a drought affected “abandoned village”, Nouné, where he meets two sisters who were four hundred years old and had been living on “hope”. They tell him of their wait for a prophesy, the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud, which would regenerate the land to its vegetative resplendence once again. Pele becomes a witness to extraordinary events of climate change and participates in the process of protecting the agents of the new environmental condition. The mythical narrative offers an alternative truth and points out that it is through language that the natural world is reduced to objects or resources to be subjectivized. Mythical discourse is beyond the rational and beyond the language dictated by culture that people respect and thus, care for the systems that support life. In this paper I propose to study Son of the Thundercloud in order to discover the mythical discourse that helps us to create a new human condition and offers a truth that allows us to rethink our responsibility to the environment we live in.*

Factual writing is oriented towards coherent, logical and cogent arguments in order to acquire credibility and acceptability. Writers are committed to the power of proof, reasoning and technical solutions to every possible problem faced by humanity. Convincing through proof and argument is construed to be the presentation of reality. Sometimes reality is so complex that it is not possible for the narrative to be rational and logical. Climate change induced disasters and famines are a reality today. The complex reality of climate change defies rational argument and can be furthered through narratives that may appear irrational and untrue. “Narratives, or stories, do not immediately present themselves as arguments. If understood as arguments, especially as arguments for general conclusions, stories would seem to exemplify various fallacies and questionable moves” (Grovier 167). Trudy Grovier in her essay “Truth and Storytelling” argues that there are many deep

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questions about narrative, about the relationship between narrative and cogent argument, and about the notion of narrative argument. She says that

Alasdair MacIntyre has said that we all live out narrative in our lives, and understand ourselves in terms of narrative. But others such as Galen Strawson have contested these claims. Do people understand their own lives in narrative terms? Should they do so? Galen Strawson maintains that it is not helpful psychologically, ethically, or cognitively, to think that people experience their lives in a narrative fashion. This notion, he says, closes down important avenues of thought, and can distort understanding and even distress people who do not regard their lives in terms of narrative. In addition, since people often smooth out their stories, taking narrative too seriously may lead us miss errors of memory and interpretation. (167)

Trudy Grovier's analysis of McIntyre and Strawson seems valid as regards simple facts of life, yet one can argue that certain natural phenomena and their impact on human life defy human comprehension. It is here that the writer is tempted to use myth in the narrative to make reality more comprehensible for those living it. Easterine Kire, a writer from Nagaland in the North East of India, expresses the pressing concern of climate and ecological change which has brought about famine and annihilated complete tribes. These are complex natural phenomena which are beyond rational truth and beyond the comprehension of common people. Kire is concerned about the Nagas, especially the Angamis, dying of starvation due to famine. She addresses this concern by means of a retelling of a Naga creation myth in her novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016). In this paper I propose to study *Son of the Thundercloud* in order to discover the mythical discourse that helps us to create a new human condition and offers a truth that allows us to rethink our responsibility to the environment we live in.

The narrative describes the journey of Pele, a man who lost his family and happiness due to a devastating famine. He was advised to go to the Village of Weavers where he would find food and hospitality. His journey leads him to a drought affected "abandoned village" Nouné which had been destroyed by a devastating famine. He learns that "new born babies died because their mother's milk dried up and there was nothing else to give them" (19). Here he meets two sisters who were four hundred years old (19) and had been living on "hope": "“Hope, sir, we have been living on hope. Every morning when we wake up, we eat hope, and so we live to see another day,”” (20) Kire's narrative plunges us into a world of despair where the social atmosphere is almost non-existent and hunger is the prime motif. That the four hundred year old sisters have survived a seven hundred year old famine is incredible but is rendered normal before the readers through the mythic narration. The sisters tell Pele of their wait for a prophesy, the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud, which would regenerate the land to its fruitfulness once again. "“They say that those of us who survived have done so because of the great hope of the ancestors who used to say that our ancient misfortune will end when the Son of the Thundercloud is born. Everything will be transformed then. He will bring rain and mist that softens the soil, and the earth will sprout again and grass again. There will be food and life. This is why we have been kept alive”” (19). There is no rationale behind this explanation, yet it appears valid

creating an affective atmosphere where the deprived characters are offered solace and the impetus to survive in worse than dire conditions.

Oksana Weretiuk in her essay 'Irish and Ukrainian Famines: Historical Memory and Aesthetic Emotions' discusses the Irish Potato famine and the great Ukrainian famine where extreme scarcity of food leads to forced starvation, death and migration. She describes this as destructive historical events and observes that

Literature can provide insight into the way specific historical events shape a society, and the attitudes, morals and behaviour of its members. It does so by interpreting important events (whether positive or negative), questioning perceptions and meaning making devices, showing how these events affected the community in question and its people. Images of famines appear mainly in fictional works which explore historical instances of tragedy provoked by the deprivation and extreme poverty of large numbers of people. ... The narratives constructed to express great famines usually serve the concepts of memory, identity and representation. (53)

Like the Irish and Ukrainian famines, the Naga famines due to natural disasters and war have been devastating. While the world's wealthiest nations produce the problem of climate change, it is disproportionately suffered by the world's poorest, especially the indigenous people who do not have access to modern technology in farming. These processes are complex and ordinary language would be inadequate to articulate such devastating and often politically coloured situations. Therefore, myths and metaphors that cannot be evaluated in terms of truth conditions are often used by writers to throw light on the vital problem of anthropogenic climate change and earth's ecological distress as well as societal negligence. Mythical language represents and redresses trauma. In this context it is relevant to cite Sapir, who says that,

It is the vocabulary of a language that most clearly reflects the physical and social environment of its speakers. The complete vocabulary of a language may indeed be looked upon as a complex inventory of all the ideas, interests, and occupations that take up the attention of the community, and were such a complete thesaurus of the language of a given tribe at our disposal, we might to a large extent infer the character of the physical environment and the characteristics of the culture of the people making use of it. It is not difficult to find examples of languages whose vocabulary thus bears the stamp of the physical environment in which the speakers are placed. (14)

Easterine Kire through her narration infers the characteristics of her people, their culture and the immediate problem at hand through a special language code that the suffering people of the Angami tribe understand. It is by means of simple retelling of Naga myths that she expresses the pressing concern of climate change that could be due to the hilly terrain of Nagaland, deforestation, cultivation along the slopes which induce erosion and loss. The myths enact the role of Naga culture and the role of the present Naga patriarchy in subjugating and exploiting nature without heeding the wisdom inherent in the cultural stories which basically protected them. Kire narrates the plight of villages which were now ghost villages because they did not heed the warning in ancient knowledge. One village

...had become a very rich village; abundant harvest filled the granaries till they began to overflow. People would leave half their harvests to rot in the fields, because there was no more space in the village granaries. Soon they grew careless about the taboo that said that every village must keep aside some grain after the harvest as seed grain.

One afternoon, when they were on their way back from the fields, the villagers saw black clouds of field mice swarming over their granaries and homes. Not one house or granary had been spared, and people had to abandon the village. (13)

This uncanny occurrence is a metaphor that emphasizes the fact that traditional knowledge of conservation and preservation would possibly have evaded such a situation. The narrative, here, is capable of formulating and proving propositions about a reality that lies beyond language. People disrespected nature's gifts, nature retaliated with "black clouds of field mice swarming over their granaries and homes" (13). Not a home was spared and people had to abandon that village because it was a "taboo to live in a village when its food stores have been wiped out by animals and insects." (ibid.) The people of the village suffer immensely due to such disaster resulting from disrespect for the taboos. In another story, members from an upper clan killed a member from a lower clan in a drunken brawl. "The murder led to a war between the two clans and, by the end of the seventh day, so much blood had been spilt in the village that it became a taboo to live there...they knew that if they had stopped the first killings they would not have lost their homes" (13). The narrative's normative function lies in the description itself. Carolyn Merchant in her book *Death of Nature* (1980) talks about imagery found in a culture's literature and says that such imagery can play a normative role within the culture. Further, "Controlling images operate as ethical restraints or as ethical sanctions- as subtle "oughts" or "ought-nots" (4) which were to be followed by people without question. Merchant's observation can be applied to the two naga stories cited above. The taboos in the ancient naga system of thought formed the prevailing ideological framework of life most essential for sustainability. Belief and faith in such stories was normative and any violation or doubt led to dire consequences such as environmental disaster. "Midgley (2011: 1) calls stories in this sense the 'myths we live by'. By myths she means 'imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world'" (qtd. Stibbe 5). In the narrative Kire talks about the loss of the ancient stories that preserved the wisdom of the world. Mesanuo, the third sister, the mother of the Son of the Thundercloud, tells Pele that "the other famine killed many more... 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" (Son 48). Subtly, the narrative proposes that rational arguments have stifled the imagination and thereby the energy to sustain the violence of nature and natural disasters.

Pele becomes a witness to extraordinary events. In Chapter three and four he sees stars suddenly appear "not as fixed pinpoints of light, but as celestial bodies moving in harmony with each other, like an orchestral dance" (24-5). they pull the earth eastward. In the morning Pele sees a deep chasm before him which was not there the previous day. "The fibrous tentacles of roots and subterranean matter were

stretched tautly between the two sides. Sharp ends of rocks jutted upward” (27). He tries to rationalize and fails to comprehend what he actually sees before him. The narrative subverts reality and the two ancient sisters explain the uncanny as the handiwork of the stars. “The stars do it sometimes” (idem), they explain. “After some weeks, when they pull again, the portion that is left behind moves forward and joins the other side” (idem). Complex phenomena like tectonic plate movements, which are scary environmental conditions, are explained through stories and their impact is thus softened. Pele participates in the process of protecting the agents of the new environmental condition. The narrative offers an alternative truth pointing out that it is through rational argument that the natural world is reduced to objects and resources and that the mythic discourse, in the narrative which is beyond the rational anthropocentric discourse, is operative through stories, myths and metaphors rendering the truth more true.

Kire’s narrative explores the Naga spiritual universe, basing upon the folktales and Angami belief system that she grew up in. The constructed identity of opulence and ideology of anthropocentric control is shattered when nature retaliates with famine and death. *Son of the Thundercloud*, tells us that the forces of nature or environment can act directly only on an individual whereby, the individual impresses upon other people her experience and thus sums up the processes both tangible and intangible to make it a communal trait. It is pertinent here to refer to Sapir’s essay, ‘Language and Environment’ where he says that,

...environment can act directly only on an individual, and in those cases where we find that a purely environmental influence is responsible for a communal trait, this common trait must be interpreted as a summation of distinct processes of environmental influences on individuals. Such, however, is obviously not the typical form in which we find the forces of environment at work on human groups. In these it is enough that a single individual may react directly to his environment and bring the rest of the group to share consciously or unconsciously in the influence exerted upon him. Whether even a single individual can be truthfully said to be capable of environmental influence uncombined with influences of another character is doubtful, but we may at least assume the possibility. The important point remains that in actual society even the simplest environmental influence is either supported or transformed by social forces. (13)

Kire’s narrative furthers Sapir’s argument, the third sister Mesanuo gives birth to the Son of the Thundercloud and thus, becomes capable of environmental influence supported by Pele and her two other sisters. As soon as her son is born the environment undergoes a sudden change. Nature becomes benevolent and the Village of Weavers was abundant with trees and crops and water where there was none before (Son 40).

By means of the retelling the Naga myth of creation and sustenance, Kire presents a story of hope, love, endurance and sustainability participated in by the Angami communities represented by a mythic village and three ancient women and the young man, Pele. She consciously recounts this myth in a story of her own that enacts a positive and progressive philosophy. “One of the features of environmental discourse is the frequency of what is often called ‘metaphor’”(Harris 155). Talking

about the use of metaphors and myths Roy Harris says that “there is a fundamental division about the role of language that can surface in all kinds of ways. At its sharpest, it emerges in where you draw the line between sense and nonsense... metaphor comes into its own whenever an attempt is made to bridge the gap between surrogational and non-surrogational discourse. It provides a means of integrating the two” (155-6). In Kire’s narrative the gap is bridged by the impregnation of Mesanuo by the raindrop and the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud. He becomes the metaphor of prosperity as his birth brings rain and salvation by regenerating the land to its fruitfulness once again. While Pele was with the ancient sisters he witnesses the rains come down extraordinarily flooding every crevice and make the drought ridden environment of the Village of Weavers miraculously resplendent again. The trees are full of foliage as if the earth had finally yielded. We read:

Young saplings that were not newly planted but had sprouted up overnight. There was no other way to describe it. They were healthy and straight and tall. Their roots had already travelled into the earth, sucking up moisture and securing a place where they had sprung up. That was not all. He [Pele] walked around the village and saw that rocks and stones were standing in places where there had been none before. (40).

The three sisters, Kethonuo, Siedze and Mesanuo, seem to have “granted themselves compensatory powers and laid claim to a distinctly intellectual position, mediating between man and nature” (Bowerbank 28). Their unmitigated faith in nature for about four hundred years has resulted in the earth forgiving the people and making the land fertile again. Unlike the headman of the village, they never doubted the miracles of nature. Susan Griffin notes

...that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says ... he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from women and nature.

We are the bird’s eggs. Bird’s eggs, flowers, butterflies, rabbits, cows, sheep; we are caterpillars, oyster and pearl, we are girls. We are women and nature. And he says he cannot hear us speak.

But we speak. (qtd. Bowerbank 27)

The discourse in Kire’s novel is optimistic pointing to the results of absolute faith that the three sisters had in nature’s justice. Griffin’s discourse confirms the woman-nature dynamics, where woman is connected with nature. She understands and cherishes nature because she is a part of nature itself: “Bird’s eggs, flowers, butterflies, rabbits, cows, sheep; we are caterpillars, oyster and pearls. We are girls.” The same confidence is seen in Mesanuo when she nurtures a raindrop in her womb and produces a boy towards making an old prophecy of salvation through faith in nature come true. This might seem unnatural to the modern reader but these metaphors compensate for the inadequacy of language to express pressing environmental matters. In the narrative the natural world is enlarged through ecological metaphors into the spiritual thereby subverting factual accounts of famine

and starvation. Robyn Penman in his essay “Environmental Matters and Communication Challenges” discusses Dr Bob Brown’s feature article on pastoralists and rangelands where Brown talks of the hazards of commercial grazing and the depletion of environment and concludes that “We can lose the biosystem, and environments can go away, as if they were independent entities.” (147) Kire’s story makes the sky and stars move and pull the earth with it and entire mountains split apart and deep awnings open up as if miraculously.

The discourse in the *Son of the Thundercloud* encourages people to respect and care for the systems that support life. The headman of the drought stricken, barren village of weavers, asks Mesanuo, the mother of the son of the Thundercloud, ““Where have those trees and rocks come from?”” (46). To this Mesanuo has a very simple answer. She says, ““It’s called birthing, headman. 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) Berardi’s statement in critiquing the ecological effects of financial structures reinforces the fact that mythical language and storytelling may not have a rationale but they help in offering an alternative to painful reality. He says that, ““Only an act of language can give us the ability to see and to create a new human condition, where we now only see barbarianism and violence. Only an act of language escaping the technical automatism of financial capitalism will make possible the emergence of a new life form”” (157). Power and violence in the discourse of financial capitalism can be countered with a mythical discourse of empathy and fraternity which in turn will give us the ability to conceive and obtain a new human condition in harmony with nature. Further, Arran Stibbe, in the Introduction to his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (2015), says that ecolinguistics investigates stories we live by. It investigates mental models that influence our behaviour. He stresses that a different discourse lies at the heart of the ecological challenges we are facing today. In the context Stibbe says,

The link between ecology and language is that how humans treat each other and the natural world is influenced by our thoughts, concepts, ideas, ideologies and worldviews, and these in turn are shaped through language. It is through language that economic systems are built, and when those systems are seen to lead to immense suffering and ecological destruction, it is through language that they are resisted and new forms of economy brought into being. (2)

The mythic narrative of *Son of the Thundercloud* forms the link between ecology and language. The Angami village elders pronounced ancestral taboos and lived by them. One such taboo was in favour of conservation and against waste: “that every village must keep aside some grain after the harvest as seed grain” (13); the other was against jealousy, drunkenness and unnecessary bloodshed among people. The Angamis economic system was built on these beliefs that were deeply entrenched in their cultural and collective psyche. Chapter 20 of *Son of the Thundercloud* “Prophecies Die in the Face of Unbelief” validates the essence of the referential and social adequacies of environmental discourse. Robyn Penman in an

essay, “Environmental Matters and Communication Challenges”, discussing environmental discourse observes that,

The first criterion of referential adequacy refers to the capacity of the language to meet the needs of its users as an instrument of the referential meaning...the third evaluative criterion ... is social adequacy. This requires that language be acceptable to a maximum number of speakers in the target community, promote social unity and communication, and cater for present as well as future social needs. (145-6)

Rhaliotuo, the son of the thundercloud in fact fulfils the prophecy and kills the spirit tiger and saves the village from its evil influence. This induces jealousy and envy in the mind of the son of the headman, Viphru, representing a power politics of the wealthy oppressive system of the village. First the headman plants the seed of disbelief by scornfully falsifying the miraculous birth of Rhaliotuo. He says: ‘Surely you don’t believe the story that a raindrop fell on her and made her conceive a child? ... ‘She had a lover. She must have had one; the whole village believes that now’.... ‘People prefer to believe what is more plausible rather than what is miraculous...’ (116) Thus influenced, the villagers believed that the tiger spirit killed by Rhalie had been actually protecting their crops by asking for regular sacrifice and blood. Once more affluent the Village of Weavers forgot the past famine and deprivation and adopted the discourse of profit. At this juncture Viphru guilefully involves Rhalie in a hunt where he tricks his other friends to think of Rhalie as a spirit tiger and kill him. The ‘unbelief’ of the people of the Village of Weavers is an example of man’s scepticism and alienation from nature. The death of faith brings in disaster again.

The rain came at night, a monster rainstorm that ruined houses and fields and flooded the river so that all arable lands were swallowed by the deluge. The fields of full-eared grain were smashed to the ground, the stalks broken so that the grain would never ripen. The roofs of houses were torn off and the signs of devastation were the last sights of the Village of weavers. (140-1)

The mythical discourse in the narrative of Kire’s novel subverts the language that the rational world conceives and understands. In such conditions stories form mental models that influence human behaviour in the face of the myriad challenges that the world is facing today. Instead of reducing nature to objects or resources to be conquered, it can be perceived more clearly and tangibly through ecological metaphors that Kire successfully uses to portray the issue of climate change and depravity in the Hills of North East of India. Kire’s narrative operating through myths establishes that it is through ancient stories that people can be encouraged to be more responsible towards the systems that support life and contribute to harmonious living and sustainability.

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