

Redefining the Cultural Hero: A Study of Monomyth in Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*

C. Keren Vinita & Sushil Mary Mathews

Abstract

The prominent Naga writer Easterine Kire interweaves the story of a lone traveller with the myth of the primeval mother and her son in her novella *Son of the Thundercloud*. Kire constructs her archetypal hero Pele who embodies the values, tradition and knowledge of Naga culture. This paper seeks to understand how Kire uses the hero's journey or monomyth as an archetype to unravel the unique cultural world of Nagaland where magic and reality merge as one. It also throws light on the use of the creation myth that helps in understanding the mystic Naga life and culture.

Keywords : Archetypal hero; Folktale; Monomyth; Naga culture; Story-telling.

Coexistence of the spiritual world and the human world has been the core belief of Naga culture that is conveyed through the oral narratives of the people of Nagaland. In the last few decades, representations of oral narratives such as folktales and myths find expression in the novels published in Nagaland. Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* interweaves the journey of Pele delineated as a cultural hero and the creation myth of primeval mother and her sons. Joseph Campbell's theory of Monomyth explains the adventurous quest of a hero through many stages that explicate human experience. This paper seeks to understand how Easterine Kire, a prominent literary voice from Nagaland uses the hero's journey or monomyth as an archetype to unravel the unique cultural world of Nagaland where magic and reality merge as one. It also throws light on the use of the creation myth that helps in understanding the mystic Naga life, culture and heritage.

Easterine Kire published *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first Naga novel in English in 2003. Kire portrays the unique culture and life of the people of Nagaland, their knowledge and philosophy of life in her writings. Her works contain authentic representations of the cultural life of Naga community and defends itself against the stereotypical perception that is prevalent of the Nagas and their literature. Her novels include *Mari*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Bitter Wormwood*, *Life on Hold*, *When the River Sleeps*, *Son of the Thundercloud*, *Don't Run my Love*, *A Respectable Woman* and *Spirit Nights*. She has published three poetry collections, short stories and children's stories and a history book titled *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland*. She has won the Governor's Medal for excellence in Naga literature (2011) and The Catalan PEN International Voice Award, at Spain.

Nagaland is one of the seven sister states of India that was formed on December 1, 1963, however the Nagas believe that their territory extends into Burma and other states of India which had been partitioned by the British. The Nagas do not have a written history and hence they primarily rely on oral history, narratives and traditions. Naga tribes mainly consist of Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Kachari, Khamniungan, Kuki, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Yimchungru and Zeliang. All the tribes share a set of core cultural beliefs that are unique to them. The traditional religion of the Nagas is animism. "Animism is the belief in the existence of spiritual beings inhabiting the natural world" (Luithui 10). Nagas attributed spiritual existence to every element in the natural world including the trees, stones, water bodies, animals and many more and they are pacified through rituals and sacrifices. "The indigenous religion as practiced by Chaya is grounded in the spirit world. There are different types of spirits – sky spirit and earth spirit. . . . Depending on their inherent nature, spirits are good or bad. Spirits can also influence the nature or personality of a person" (Dey).

The Nagas believe in many origin myths that includes the origin story of primeval mother and her sons spirit, tiger, and man; the myth of Longterok or six stones from which Ao and sub clans originated, creation of landscape by Lijaba the creator god, and the origin stone from which Angami, Lotha, Chakaesang and Sema tribes originated. Naga writers like Temsulo Ao, Avinuo Kire, M. Alemchiba Ao, Lanu Wallinger and Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton incorporate these myths and folktales in their writings to preserve their oral traditions as well as for access to the younger generations and non-natives.

Indigenous people have gathered knowledge about their culture and traditions for over thousand years learning from the physical environment and from experiences by having a close relationship with nature. They learn lessons and understand the principles of life by observing the different entities of nature which may include the sun, the moon, rivers, rain, land, animals and the spirit world. As such enormous indigenous knowledge find their sources “from the immediate world of personal and tribal experiences, . . . and from the spiritual world evidenced through dreams, visions, and signs . . .” (Battiste 25). Traditional knowledge and history acquired through experience and observation is passed down orally to the succeeding generations to give them the understanding of who they are, where they come from and where they belong. Oral tradition and knowledge are transferred using oral narratives in the form of sacred songs, myths, folktales, legends, cultural traditions and beliefs.

Ščigulinská writes,

Oral tradition and storytelling represent a crucial part of the 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 the 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. (116)

For the indigenous communities, oral narratives are crucial as they serve as a bridge between the past and the present. The narrator or the storyteller has the challenging task of making the oral narratives relevant to the younger generations through their creativity and guidance. Also, the oral narratives provide an understanding of the worldview of the native people and a proper cultural knowledge of their worldview would help in appreciating the oral narratives as they have many variations and layers of meaning. Thus, an understanding of the indigenous worldview, beliefs and culture is important when studying oral narratives. Moreover, oral narratives are the foundation of all cultures and are inevitable. Ščigulinská notes that “[T]he storytelling becomes a part of the ceremonial interconnecting the spiritual and the real worlds of the indigenous peoples, that should not exist without each other” (117).

Kire’s Son of the Thundercloud is the winner of the Bal Sahitya Puraskar award 2018 and Book of the Year (Fiction) at Tata Literature Live Awards 2017. It depicts a world with supernatural elements where hu-

mans and spirits coexist reaffirming the indigenous belief of the Nagas. Kire beautifully weaves a tale where magic and reality blend giving the readers a taste of the uncharted terrains of Naga culture incorporating the origin myth of tiger, spirit, and man. In an interview with Kim Aurora for the Times of India, Kire said, "We felt we needed to create written Naga Literature. We have so much oral narratives but with oral dying out, it's all going to be lost."

In this novel, Kire draws on the myth and symbols which are archetypes that are embedded in the collective unconscious of the Naga people. Jung opined thus,

And the essential thing, psychologically, is that in dreams, fantasies, and other exceptional states of mind the most far-fetched mythological motifs and symbols can appear autochthonously at any time, often, apparently, as the result of particular influences, traditions, and excitations working on the individual, but more often without any sign of them. These "primordial images" or "archetypes," as I have called them, belong to the basic stock of the unconscious psyche and cannot be explained as personal acquisitions. Together they make up that psychic stratum which has been called the collective unconscious. (Significance 3068)

Here Kire renders a fascinating story of the protagonist Pele a representative of Angami men who lives in accordance with the ideals, beliefs and customs of the culture. Kire creates the character who fits into the hero archetype bearing the values and morals of his culture. The hero acts as a carrier of the value systems of the culture. Kire delineates the character of Pele as an archetypal hero who encounters Mesanuo, the mythical representation of *Dziilimosiuro* – the Earth mother. Rhalie who is Mesanuo's son could also be analyzed under the hero archetype as the character displays particular heroic features. Therefore, both Pele and Rhalie can be considered as heroes of the Naga community. The objective of the paper is to analyse the stages of the hero's journey as postulated by Joseph Campbell through the character of Pele and Rhalie. The paper also throws light on how Kire uses the myth of Son of thundercloud and other archetypes to reveal the mystic Naga way of life and culture.

In the prologue of the novel, the story of the Son of the thundercloud is narrated to Pele by his grandmother. The story deals with the tiger widow, an old woman who had lost her husband and seven sons to a tiger. With a wounded heart she waited to join her loved ones after death. One

day while she was out in the fields dark clouds gathered and a rain drop from the sky fell on her and impregnated her. She gave birth to a son who grew up into a warrior and avenged the death of his father and brothers. Kire retells the Angami origin myth of the tiger, spirit, and man. The woman who preexisted is called *Dziiliimosiuro* which means 'crystal clear water' (Mao). She begot three sons tiger, spirit, and man representing the animal world, spirit world, and mankind respectively. A dispute broke out between the sons as to who should inherit the land. So, she made a ball of grass and set it in the middle of the land and stated that the one who touches it first would inherit it. Favouring man who looked after her well, *Dziiliimosiuro* instructed him to use the bow and arrow to win the contest. Man succeeded and the land became his property. This created enmity between the three brothers; man took control of the land while spirit and tiger moved into the forest. This myth is prevalent among some of the tribes of the Nagas.

Kire uses the above mentioned creation myth to delineate the characters Mesanuo whose name also means 'the pure one' (Kire 37) and Rhalie her son who represents man. The birth of Rhalie rejuvenates the desolate lands and fields. The headman in the village tells that the birth of Rhalie is the fulfillment of the prophecy: "A virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son and he will save his people. Signs and wonders shall accompany his birth, and the land shall be rejuvenated" (41). He also says, "'And I must confess I didn't really believe in it. I thought it was just a story told to keep the children quiet'" (40).

Kire draws attention to how disbelief in the stories, myths and legends brings darkness and desolation to the land while strong faith in the same rejuvenates and brings in prosperity and happiness. At several instances in the novel, Kire through the voice of Mesanuo talks about the "famine of stories and songs" (Kire 48) about the son of the Thundercloud who seemed to be the Hope for the people. When Pele asks Mesanuo how the drought in the land was caused earlier she answers thus:

'So long as the storytellers were alive, there was hope and compassion in people's hearts, and their minds received and accepted that. But when the storytellers were killed, one after the other, people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness. So the drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories.' (64)

Gert Jacobus Malan in his article "Ricoeur on myth and demythologizing" explicates the functions of myth as stated by Ricoeur. He clarifies,

[T]he threefold function of myth as embracing humanity in one ideal history, narrating a movement from beginning to end; thus imparting orientation, character and tension to our experience; and lastly trying to get at the enigma of human existence, namely the discord between the fundamental reality of man as innocent, and the actual modality of man as defiled, sinful and guilty.

A metaphorical interpretation can be made where the desolate land could be compared to human psyche and the knowledge about the myths, legends and other stories could feed the mind with wisdom and understanding of the world.

The role of storytelling and stories and how they manifest into dreams also finds emphasis in the novel when Mesanuo narrates various stories to Rhalie whenever he demands. He hears the story of the seed that multiplied itself in the hands of a father who fed his sick daughter with it and she was cured. Another story tells of a man who tries to steal the magic pebble from a water spirit. Rhalie personalizes the dream: "He dreamt he was the seed and he dreamt he was the old man who could feed his dying daughter back to life" (Kire 69). Dream is used in this novel as a personalized myth. "Dream is the personalized myth, myth the depersonalized dream. Both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamic of the psyche" (Campbell 18). After hearing from his mother about the story of the tiger that killed a man and his seven sons, "he [Rhalie] dreamt that he had killed the tiger" (Kire 70). The dream becomes a personalized myth to Rhalie and his destiny is therefore confirmed which was to slay the tiger and avenge the death of his loved ones. Rhalie's private dream becomes depersonalized when his aunt Siedze dreams of a boy, referring to Rhalie, killing the tiger and saving the villagers. The dream comes true when Pele takes Rhalie for a hunting practice and Rhalie kills the tiger with the spear that was specially crafted by his aunts thus fulfilling the prophecy. Kire deftly uses the myth to form the core structure of the plot and the story thus elevates from a myth to that of a folktale.

Joseph Campbell, a Jungian in his approach formulated the features of the theory of the Hero's Journey in his book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The term hero's journey was borrowed from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It is a story behind a story and it denotes the unity of mankind's spiritual history. He writes that "the mythological adventure of the hero

is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (Campbell 28). In the novel’s first chapter Kire describes the birth of the protagonist Pele, whose destiny is to be a wanderer and who is meant to live a powerful life true to his name. His name Pelevotso meant “faithful to the end” given by his grandmother who says that children cannot be given “safe and insignificant names” because such names would prevent them “from living a life of heroism and wisdom” (Kire 12). Pele is born in the ordinary world in the village of Nialhuo in the hills surrounded by forests and he is brought up in the knowledge of beliefs, taboos and customs of the village. His parents feared he might choose a life of heroism as told by his grandmother who “spoke to him about opening his heart to the unknown” (14).

The first stage in the journey of the hero is the “separation from the world” that begins with “the call to adventure” (Campbell 33; 53). The call to adventure is the call of destiny that takes the hero’s “spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (53). The call for Pele occurs when the village experiences severe famine that was predicted by a seer of the village. Pele loses his wife, his children, and his parents to the famine. He decides to leave the village that he can no longer call home. The hero does not refuse the call and willingly undertakes the journey. As he passes through other villages, he is told to go to the Village of Weavers as there was food and water in the village. “Pele decided to go, if only to keep travelling. . . . He did not know what he wanted; . . . The journey could take him anywhere, or nowhere” (Kire 17).

Pele crosses his “first threshold” (Campbell 34) when he comes to a mountain which was desolate all around and where the earth was dry and barren. The land becomes an unknown terrain with no signs of life and is covered in ruins. The fear of the unknown is still present in the hero when he encounters the two spirit sisters Kethonuo and Siedze in the mountain. These two characters represent the “supernatural aid” (34) that the hero receives. Pele meets the two sisters who look like spirits but are human and they extend hospitality to him and urge Pele to stay with them. The two old women both aged around four hundred years tell the hero that famine had outlasted them in the village of Nouné. They have been eagerly desiring the birth of the son of the thundercloud who will bring an end to the desolation. The hero receives spiritual understanding and wisdom from them that will equip him for the journey to come. They instill in Pele that he needs to live on Hope which will take him nearer to the purpose of his life. For the sisters their purpose is to see the son of the thundercloud.

The sisters tell him, "For nothing has meaning without him, and nothing is worth living for apart from him" (Kire 29). Pele understands for the first time that his heart has become void and he decides to leave the place in search for something his life is worth living for. This change in his heart to pursue his life's purpose heralds the long-awaited rain with thunder and storm- the sign of the birth of the son of the thundercloud. A heavy torrent replenishes everything including the sisters who begin to grow younger. Pele comes to know that their names "Kethonuo meant truth, and Siedze . . . meant a future full of hope" (34). With the knowledge of the truth and hope for the future, Pele travels to the Village of Weavers along with the old women.

The hero enters into the Initiation phase of his journey which is the "Meeting with the Goddess" (Campbell 100). The two women meet their youngest sister Mesanuo in the Village of Weavers and Pele introduces himself to her. Mesanuo reveals to them how she has become pregnant when a rain drop fell on her the day before. The story of the tiger widow narrated by his grandmother surfaces to Pele's mind from the collective unconscious and he acknowledges Mesanuo as the same woman. "She was transparently beautiful. Not young, just sort of ageless in a way that defied time and decay. Like her name, which meant 'the pure one', she exuded a purity of spirit that was not lost on Pele" (Kire 37). Kire describes the transformation in the hero's perception. He understands how the world has changed into a place of mystery and magic yet it seemed real and true. He is astonished by Mesanuo giving birth to the son the very next day. Explaining the role of the goddess archetype Campbell notes:

Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know. As he progresses in the slow initiation which is life, the form of the goddess undergoes for him a series of transfigurations: she can never be greater than himself, though she can always promise more than he is yet capable of comprehending. (106)

Mesanuo represents the virgin mother and goddess archetype as she gives birth to Rhalie the son of the prophecy. The villagers witness the changes in the land with the river overflowing, and the trees and plants that had grown overnight. They beg Mesanuo's forgiveness for isolating her and for their disbelief in the prophecy. Mesanuo teaches Pele not only about the physical famine but also about the famine of the story tellers with whom hope died, the reason for the desolation of the land. Mesanuo comments on the darkness that resides in the hearts of people who

refuse to have faith, compassion and an open mind. She makes Pele understand that the drought can occur again if people are driven by greed. Pele becomes enamoured of Mesanuo and her influence on him. Pele sees the transformation of the earth woman in Mesanuo from the heart-broken tiger widow into a guiding light. When Mesanuo tells Pele how she must strengthen herself so Rhalie can live out his purpose, Pele states that life is unpredictable. She replies, "I don't agree, Pele. Life is hard and unexpected, but we can direct it to go the way we want it to. . . . The soft and vulnerable woman he thought he knew down in the valley had become a different person up on the mountaintop. He tried to define her, and groped for words" (Kire 92). Mesanuo acknowledges that Pele's coming had brought the rain and eventually the birth of Rhalie placing Pele on a higher pedestal than herself. She gives him all the understanding he needs to live his life further. Pele having found his purpose of life begins living for Mesanuo and Rhalie. He helps Mesanuo at the field, takes care of Rhalie, teaches him how to use the slingshot and protects him like a father.

An important part of the initiation stage is when the hero goes through "the Road of trials" where he is "aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage" (Campbell 89). Pele and Mesanuo return with Rhalie from their sisters' village to fulfill Rhalie's destiny of killing the tiger. At this instance both Pele and Rhalie could be attributed as heroes. Rhalie because he succeeds in killing the tiger with the special spear. Mesanuo says that the tiger is a spirit tiger and spiritual weapons are needed to kill it and stop its influence on the villagers who offer sacrifices to it. Rhalie having spotted the tiger and believing he was born to kill the tiger jumps first to encounter it. "Rhalie was fearless the moment he jumped into action. . . . The tiger fell heavily upon the spear. Its heart was pierced right through by the spearhead that was designed only for one purpose: to kill a spirit tiger" (Kire 129). Rhalie was able to succeed in killing the tiger because "he was not fighting to earn a name for himself as the others were doing. He wanted to kill the tiger to stop it from hurting any more people. The boy's heart was pure . . ." (85). Rhalie is celebrated by the villagers and they initiate the ritual of tiger killing. Rhalie proves his purpose and the dream of killing the tiger in his unconscious becomes a reality.

The ordeal that Pele as the hero undergoes could be seen when Rhalie is killed by Viphru, the headman's son during a community hunt. Viphru becomes jealous of Rhalie because he was called by the villagers as the

young tiger killer and was showered with fondness and praise. When the men left for the community hunt, the younger boys under Viphru were instructed to chase the animals up the hill. While Rhalie took cover behind a tree, unseen by others Viphru pointed at him and misled the others to take him for a deer. He threw his spear that plunged straight into Rhalie's heart killing him. The death of Rhalie is Pele's great loss. He is filled with anger and rage because of the fate that has befallen him and Mesanuo. "He wept in anger, he wept in loss, he wept at his impotence to stop this happening" (Kire 139). Rhalie meets death whereas Pele has to face the death of Rhalie to whom he was a faithful father figure. Rhalie's death questions Pele's journey and his purpose of life from then on.

The last phase of the hero's journey is his "return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society" (Campbell 182). Pele and Mesanuo return to the abandoned village of the sisters to bury Rhalie. Mesanuo confesses that her purpose is fulfilled on earth: "I was to mother a son, not from the dust of the earth, but from rain, because water is the purest form of life you can find. It is a metaphor for true love. He would teach people how to love" (Kire 141). Mesanuo renames the village as Nouzie meaning compassion in memory of Rhalie who wished good even for his enemies. That very night, Mesanuo passes away and joins her loved ones in death. Elixir here represents love and wisdom that Pele inherits from his relationship with the two sisters, Mesanuo, and Rhalie. As Kethonuo says to Rhalie, "Love is forever. If you love us, your love is stronger than death and even death cannot separate us" (110). Pele's faithfulness to Mesanuo and her family can be considered as the fulfillment of his life's purpose which signifies the end of his journey. Kire concludes the last chapter titled "Traveller" signifying that Pele would continue his journey to a new land forever influenced by the journey. She writes, "But there was a sense of closure about the last death; that was how it was meant to be. They belonged together, and his destiny was to be part of their life, briefly" (149).

Kire through the character of Pele shows the characteristics of an archetypal hero born in a traditional community who is called for a life of travel. He is confronted with a magical world blended in everyday life of the common people representing the culture and beliefs of the Nagas. He fulfills his purpose by being faithful to the people he meets and comes to love and cherish Kethonuo, Siedze, Mesanuo and Rhalietuo. Like the archetypal hero who is wielded with a weapon, Pele uses his knowledge of his people's beliefs, myths and put his faith in them. Because of which the mystery of the desolation and the role of the storytellers was revealed to him. His indigenous knowledge is his weapon and true to his name he

stays faithful by being instrumental in the fulfillment of the prophecy. He fulfills his calling and becomes a true self of the hero, the bearer of cultural values and morals of the Naga community. Kire through the narrative appeals to the younger generations to believe in the power of faith, hope and love to overcome the dark side of humanity. She also makes clear that the realm of the spirits and the human world exist on the same plane.

The narrative also serves as resistance to the cynical notion of the Nagas as insurgents and an aggressive community. Easterine Kire portrays through the characters of Pele and other primary characters the goodness and compassionate heart reflective of her people. Kire's narrative not only adds a fresh facet to the repertoire of Naga literature at a time when works centered on conflicts remained the general expectation from the publishers but also has found a place on par with mainstream Indian literature in English. Kire has established herself as an authentic voice of Nagaland by constructing a tale where she redefines the cultural hero, embodying Naga values, beliefs and way of life. Through the novel the myths of the Naga people residing in their deep unconscious is given permanence and life. As Jung stated,

That is the secret of great art, and of its effect upon us. The creative process . . . consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. (Portable 321)

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