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Voices from "Prison": The Experience of Reading Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao

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INTRODUCTION

In one of most potent prose works entitled 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' – a short essay written by a Naga woman writer brings into focus many serious and important aspects of literary activities in a North East Indian hill-state like Nagaland. In this essay, the writer Easterine Kire addresses many of the intrinsic problems faced by the Naga writers of current times. What is remarkable is Easterine's brilliant handling of the idea of "prison" which refers to the inhibitions imposed on them by different social and political forces. She has tried to scrutinise her own understanding of the term "prison," as a metaphor that relates to her challenge of telling her own story as a native of Nagaland where the very human existence had been crippled by agonizing social circumstances. In this paper, I shall first try to understand what Kire wants to address by referring to the term "prison" in her essay, and then I shall try to explore how Temsula Ao, another Naga woman writer in her fictional works, provides her own response to this idea of "prison" – that is Nagaland itself, through a kind of writing which we may purposefully call "the narrative of lived experience."

Today, issues of articulation and authenticity in representation have been the two most prevailing aspects of Naga English literature in the context of Indian Writing in English. Because, contemporary writers feel that representation from outside Nagaland has robbed the Nagas of its history and tradition since colonial times. Naga history is essentially oral, and in many occasions, Western print culture has been seen as

an intruder that has made many of the traditional oral materials from Nagaland vanish following charges of their being obscure and irrelevant in the context of modernity. However, there are some written histories of Nagaland mostly derived from the records of the American missionaries and British colonial leaders. But, such histories are mostly derivative, and many emerging writers tend to claim that they are not based on authenticity. Subsequently, there can be seen a tendency among the contemporary Naga writers to argue that this type of history which is never based on a proper source, is nothing but a myth. This is however, a very dangerous situation, as for today's common inhabitants of Nagaland, history is nothing but documentation, numbers and tales of the famous Naga heroes who shaped it. Naga history is essentially oral, but orality does not have any validity in this kind of a received version of history. The important point is that for the writers of Nagaland, oral history is more influential that written history because they feel that the oral tradition is a way of life. Against all sorts of "mythical portrayal" of the Naga history, contemporary Naga writers like Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, in their works mostly written in English, have taken important steps to delve deeper into their oral history to provide a more authentic version of themselves, their history and culture.

Easterine Kire has brought the mesmerising and animated Naga culture to the rest of the world through her prolific writings that evoke a raw appeal of the age old traditions and folklores from the deepest corners of Nagaland. The essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' is one of her best reflections on the plight of the writers in Nagaland. Originally delivered as a Speech at International PEN Conference, Tromso, Norway, 6-12 September 2004, this interesting essay helps to understand many of the problems faced by a Naga writer in contemporary times. However, the metaphor of "prison" for a Naga writer can be used in a number of ways. For example, today's literary practices in Nagaland mostly emerged as a response to life-changing experiences like – the Naga leaders' call for Civil Disobedience in 1955 aiming at political freedom from India, Indian Government sending army to arrest the Naga leaders, the

subsequent declaration of Naga Hills as a "disturbed area" following the emerging "freedom movement" with many Naga youths resorting to arms, the Indian Government trying to cover up the atrocities of Indian Army on the innocent Naga people, the Indian Government intentionally isolating Nagaland from main stream media calling it fierce and dangerous further branding the political unrest in Nagaland as a law and order problem.

Against such backdrops, the use of the metaphor of a "prison" is quite apt and reflective as it also suggests the need for the freedom of expression against all odds and against all sorts of isolation and insularity. And writers like Kire and Ao are to be seen as some powerful voices to have reacted to the charges of insularity and isolation by resorting to a digging-up of Nagaland's oral history and tradition through their literary works. Subsequently, a critique of the conflict-ridden socio-historical problems in Nagaland, which has been sought to be seen as a "prison," and the use and promotion of oral history as means of exposure have been seen as the two most dominant tropes in contemporary Naga literature, including those of Kire and Ao, that have emerged in most recent decades.

ESTERINE KIRE AND HER WORKS

Easterine Kire, who is a poet, writer, and novelist from Nagaland, was born in 1959 in Kohima. In most of her works, she has tried to reflect on the realities of life the way it is in Nagaland, the complexities of colonial atrocities and discrimination, the in-house enmity and ideological differences among the Naga insurgents fighting for freedom. The fact is that since she had been five years old, she had had the bitter experiences of the clashs in Nagaland which included her lying flat on a cold cement floor with her younger brother when bullet shots echoed around their neighbourhood. While her grandfather and brother were having a sound sleep, a bullet rushed over their heads and pierced through the wall. Her father too was shot at but the bullet instead hit her cousin on the thigh. Thus, Kire remembers that curfews and continued gunfire were

integral part of her daily existence as a child in Nagaland. Besides, many people used to come to her grandfather's house with stories of captured men being tortured and killed following the rise of insurgency during the 80s. Since then, the cycle of killing and counter revenge-killing crippled the lives of the common people in different parts of Nagaland. Atrocities by Indian Army also continued as they used to randomly shoot at the civilian houses in Kohima in around 1995 where many innocent people, including children, were either killed or maimed.

Easterine Kire has written several books in English including three collections of poetry and short stories, keeping this background in mind. Her first novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* recounts the battle between the colonial forces of Britain and the village warriors of Khonoma. Also categorised as historical fiction, this novel is often considered the first English novel written by a writer from Nagaland. *Mari*, another of her bestselling novel, recounts the true story of a young mother who after losing her fiancé in the war bravely makes the decision to live on for her child. It also portrays some unknown facets of the World War II, a lesser known but ferocious battle fought against the Japanese troops in Nagaland. Kire, in this novel, brings alive a forgotten history of a place ravaged by war. Her latest book *Bitter Wormwood* is a novel on the Indo-Naga conflict. It is about how the decades-long freedom struggle has changed the lives of the common people in Nagaland. Besides writing fiction, Easterine has been actively involved in working on creating better opportunities for the Naga youths and nurturing and translating the Naga folktales. She has translated hundreds of oral poems from her native language Tenyidie into English. Easterine is also the founder and partner in a publishing house called "Barkweaver" which gathers and publishes Naga folktales.

A cursory look at her works may suggest that they reflect the realities of life the way they are in Nagaland and the complexities around the colonial violence and bigotry and the in-house rivalry and ideological differences among the Naga rebels fighting for freedom. She has brought the fascinating and

vibrant Naga culture alive to the rest of the world through her prolific writings that evoke a raw appeal of the age-old traditions and folklores from the deepest corners of Nagaland.[1] However, there are changes in every aspects of the Naga society. Commenting on this, M. Horam, in his book *Nagas Old Ways New Trends* says,

> One of the most significant features taking place in Naga society is not only the tremendous social changes that are taking place but also deliberate endeavour by the State Government to change its social structure–specially in the field of economic developments. From the primitive life, they have travelled very far and thus the process which was started, more appropriately after the Second World War, have now received greater impetus, and more effectively after the granting of statehood to the Nagas in1963 (Horam 1998: 92).

Horam also affirms that change by saying that 'one of the most important factors that bring about the change is due to social unrest developed during the past two decades, there were and are certain number of Naga individuals who were and are discontented, and we may, therefore, safely, classify the nature of social unrest which brings about the change in Naga society as "man unrest" and "individual restlessness," the first kind was shown by the armed conflict between the Nagas and the Indian Army which resulted in the granting of a statehood after much bloodshed and hatred. One can find traces of Horam's ideas in Kire's.

The essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' can be seen as an attempt at exploring Kire's personal experience as a writer from Nagaland. The very title of the essay is suggestive of some of the important aspects of her writerly self. At the very outset of the essay, she clarifies that:

> Every man is a story. Every nation is a bristling galaxy of stories. To be able to share one's story-shouldn't that be a basic human right? Where there is denial of the freedom to tell our stories, invisible prisons are created. Invisible prisons are more

> poisonous, more effective than visible prisons. The denial of the right to tell our stories violates our humanity. (Misra 2011: 272)

Then, in order to explain the concept of "prison," she states:

> Naga writers face the experience of apathy and more. We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalised simply because I am a Naga, twice marginalised because I am a woman and thrice marginalised because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community. This is the invisible prison that I am referring to. (Misra 2011: 273)

Thus, it is quite explicit that her stance as a Naga writer is full of dissatisfaction. There is no publishing house to publish their writings born out of their first hand experience. That results in transforming their tales by some outsiders, who sometimes distort the second hand experience and go on publishing with full credit. She further stated: "Our truths are being distorted. Our stories are being stolen. Our voices are being silenced. These prisons are man-made and invisible. But they are as real as visible prisons" (Misra 2011: 274).

Today Easterine Kire continues to write from Tromso, Northern Norway, and dream of peace for her people in almost all her works. At the same time, she has widely spoken about the long-term damage done to her people during the years of protracted conflict. While several other writers of the International Cities of Refuge Network[2] have experienced prison physically, she and her people have been living within an invisible "prison" for many years, denied freedom of expression, freedom of nationhood, and most painfully freedom of life itself. She has been praised in several blocks for trying to find new ways to help her people, especially the young ones whose future should not be conditioned any longer by a shadowed past. As she states:

> I live on the edge of the earth. Perhaps, you, too, live on your own edges of the earth. My edge of the earth is called Nagaland. In the minds of its people, Nagaland is a nation. What is its story? The poetry of the hills and dark, dense woods, the spirit stories

> that nestle in every village, the high romance of star-crossed lovers as well as of the people who turn into stars, and now, in recent years, the long holocaust of genocide, rape and torture of a gentle people. (Misra 2011: 273)

Although the essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' appears to be a personal one, yet it is a careful disclosure on the literary history of Nagaland also. According to Dr. Tilottama Misra, "The scribal tradition is a recent one amongst the Nagas and before the development of a script for the Naga languages through the efforts of the American Baptist missionaries; literature was confined only to the oral form" (p. xxiv). However, the different tribes of the Naga society took the written form after the arrival of Christianity. This transition from oral tradition to written one was a significant event in the history of Nagaland. And, that in the process results in the most appealing and heart-touching literature from Nagaland. Dr. Misra also states:

> [T]he literature that developed in the different Naga languages during the early years of their acquiring written forms, bore the recognisable stamp of the style, imagery and diction of the Bible…the changes that came to its people after the outbreak of war between the Naga underground army and the Indian Government forces which completely transformed the cultural ethos of the people, bringing in significant changes in what was considered the 'Naga way of life. (Misra 2011: xxv)

All such ideas help us to understand Kire's upbringing as a Naga Writer. Because, as a very sensitive writer Kire seeks to depict in this essay the agonies and ecstasies of her people and native place, which were, till a few decades ago, completely deprived of the opportunities prevalent in the main land of India.

While considering Easterine Kire as a non-resident Naga writer, I am also reminded of another very powerful Naga writer Temsula Ao who is writing from inside. Commenting on the plight of writers from Nagaland, Ao had stated:

> The post-1950s generation of Naga writers have journeyed through territories of the mind which are distant from the world of simple Christian pieties upheld by the newly converted Christian writers of the earlier period. The new literature, most of which is in English, has sprung from the staccato cry of the machine guns, and reflects the revolutionary ideals of the militants as well as the disillusionment with their ways that followed. The course of the struggle has also transformed the whole idiom of poetry as well as prose fiction and words with sinister connotations have crept into the vocabulary of common speech. (Ao 2006a: 11-12)

Similarly, Kire also recollects her experiences of growing up in Nagaland like this: "Curfews and continued periods of gun-fire were all a part of growing up in Nagaland."[3] This is how, this paper seeks to bring both the writers together for discussing the issues raised, and the essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' has been seen as a take-off point to analyse the birth pangs of any literary work emerging from Nagaland.

TEMSULA AO AND HER WORKS

Temsula Ao is yet another Naga poet, short story writer and ethnographer writing mostly in English. Known for her research on oral culture and traditions of the Naga tribes, Ao seems to have taken liberty in writing her experiences in the form of the short fiction. As a native of Nagaland, Temsula Ao too experienced the sense of being in confinement and fear. From 2000 to early 2005, she personally experienced the stress of living in a house that was frequented by armed men at night because of the political writings of her spouse. Threats were also directed at her when an article of her appeared in the papers protesting inhuman killings.[4] In the works she has written so far, she has tried to portray most vividly some of these experiences. As a writer Ao has published two short story collections – *These Hills Called Home: Stories from the War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for my Head* (2009). The former consists of ten short stories which deal with insurgency in Nagaland fired by a sense of self determination of the Naga

people, while the later comprises eight short stories which have mythical as well as modern overtones. The stories are sensitive, evocative and also powerful deliberations on experiences felt by the women writers. One of her essays, aptly entitled 'Benevolent Subordination,'[5] gives expression to this state of affairs in Nagaland, and Ao mentions that many men tend to protect women not necessarily out of love, but because they consider women as weak and vulnerable. If one wants to revolutionise this, one will land up going against one's own fathers, brothers and uncles. The name of her latest work is *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags: A Memoir*.

If literature is considered a reflection of the changing reality of a society, most of the regional Indian writers like Temsula Ao are often seen to have dealt with the specific socio-cultural realities of their respective regions. Describing how ordinary people cope with violence and negotiate power and force, how they seek and find safe spaces in the midst of terror, a writer like Ao ponders over a way of life under threat from the forces of territorial conflicts, ethnic crisis, modernisation and war. For her, identity is a word replete with meanings evocative of multiple interpretations. Assigning a common identity to the ethnic groups collectively known as the Nagas, speaking many different languages, and comprising many distinct linguistic groups with different dialects, is very problematic. For a Naga individual, identity is not static or fixed, but multilayered. This brings in the other related theoretical issues like nationalism, territory and space. Temsula Ao writes:

> It was as though a great cataclysmic upheaval threw up many realities for the Nagas within which they are still struggling to settle for a legitimate identity… Nagaland's story of the struggle for self-determination started with high idealism and romantic notions of fervent nationalism, but it somehow got re-written into one of disappointment and disillusionment because it became the very thing it sought to overcome. (Ao 2006a: x)

In her moving 'Foreword' to the book *These Hills Called Home*, entitled 'Lest we forget,' Ao states that not being the

kind of person who would brush aside the pain of another human being, "in these stories I have endeavoured to revisit the lives of those people whose pain has so far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged" (Ao 2006a: ix). She further adds that her stories do not state "historical facts," nor are they about "condemnation, justice or justification of the events which raged through the land like a wildfire half a century ago." "On the contrary," as she beautifully asserts, "what the stories are trying to state is that in such conflicts, there are no winners, only victims and the results can be measured only in human terms. For the victims the trauma goes beyond the realm of just the physical maiming and loss of life – their very humanity is assaulted and violated, and the onslaught leaves the survivors scarred both in mind and soul" (p. x). This experience can be explained with the help of an example. A story like 'The Curfew Man' in *These Hills Called Home* has its genesis in the turbulent years of bloodshed and tears that refer to the history of the Nagas since early 50s of the 20th century, and their demand for independence from the Indian State. So, the main thrust in such stories is to probe how the events of that period have re-structured the Naga psyche. Thus, a story like 'The Curfew Man' is to be regarded as the snippets of those innocent people of the Naga Hills whose peace was shattered by political designs, the common suffering folk hardly understood. Ao compels the readers to empathise with the suffering people with her attempt to create a wholeness of experience. Such frank narratives by a Naga woman writer powerfully brings out the frightening reality in this part of India to contemporary readers fed on news-stories based on jargons like "insurgency," "mainstream," "encounter," "surrender," "atrocity," "human rights" and so on. Besides, the very specific experiences, of which the writers themselves are a part, make them implicitly comment on certain issues which have gained significance in terms of women's relationship with the society, culture and history of their own society.

Here comes the consideration of the term "prison" as these writers have reduced the problem of visibility of the writers from India's North East by trying to be free from the "prison."

Even Sahitya Akademi and literary organisations like KATHA has rendered a great service by promoting the works of these writers by publishing and translating many of their works in several other Indian languages. Yet the problem of being "marginalized" looms large among these writers which is reflected in the way they are trying to showcase their traditions and cultures through fictional writings. Thus, being in a marginalised state also metaphorically refers to "prison." Although, most of the stories by Ao are women-centric and symbolise her concern over gender issues, they also excel in representing the entire history of the Naga communities. Oral story-telling becomes a necessary tool for Temsula Ao for delving deep into the practice of writing in a place like Nagaland. Easterine Kire in the essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' makes an interesting comment on the usefulness of orality in the context of her culture. She states:

> Naga society was and continues to be a highly oral society. Both men and women take pride in oratory skill, which is an expression of the agility of the mind. We have an overwhelming majority of orators but only a handful of writers. We feel the immense pressure to document our oral literature and native wisdom and simultaneously direct the path Naga writing would like to take. But Naga writing is facing the same fate that Aboriginal writing of Austarlia had faced some years ago. (Misra 2011: 273)

Such a consideration helps to read Temsula Ao's works from the point of view of orality. Because, Temsula Ao, whose own works also display a sensitive blending of the oral and the written, perhaps claims that 'new literature, rich with indigenous flavour, that is being created by modern storytellers and poets from the North East, does not seem to have a political agenda like the postcolonial literature that is emerging in Africa and Native America. Drawing a dividing line between them and North East India Temsula states in her essay 'Writing Orality':

> …the people of North East India seem to have attained a new 'maturity' in their perceptions about themselves, that the 'other'

> of their position vis-a-vis mainland India was not 'them' elsewhere but very much within their own sense of isolation in an oral culture. Once articulated through the written text, similarities of world views have helped forge new affinities, and at the same time enabled them to accept the differences as only uniqueness of any given culture rather than as dominators of any deficiency or inferiority. (qtd. in Misra 2011: xvi)

Such views regarding identity and articulation help readers to examine Temsula Ao's fictions from the perspective of an insider from the "prison" of memories and conflicts.

There is no denying the fact that unlike those found in the other parts of the country, North-Eastern literatures are yet to prove their strength and make their presence felt in the national and international perspectives. In such a context, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, can be seen as a significant attempt made by a Naga writer to present this part of India to the rest of the world. It is also pertinent to note that in Nagaland, each tribe with its distinct language, social customs and dress codes, has continued to live as an identifiable ethnic entity within the group collectively known as the Nagas (Ao 2006b: 6). Within the tribe what is also important is that identity is deeply rooted in the village of his birth and residence. Being a resident of a particular village is the most important aspect of Naga identity specifying ethnic and linguistic space. A Naga, banished from his own ancestral village for political, criminal and social offences is like a person without a country. There can be no greater humiliation for a Naga than this fate that robs him off this symbolic identity and he is thus disaffiliated from his origin and tradition. Hence, "the combination of ethnicity and territory gives a Naga the most dynamic definition of his identity" (p. 6). In Temsula Ao's book *These Hills Called Home*, we do find both an assertion of such ideas as well as a strong negation of all sorts of nationalistic representations of Nagaland and its people. Such views of Ao help the readers to accept her as one of the most powerful female voices of North East India.

CONCLUSION

Decades-long bloodshed and terror have marked the history of Nagaland and its people who live in the troubled North-Eastern region of India. Their struggle for an independent Nagaland and their continuing search for identity provide both the contexts and intertexts for the very few Naga fictional works published so far. Temsula Ao's fictional works especially, *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, carries with it the significance of an insider's views on certain contemporary issues which I believe, also provide room for thoughtful speculations on certain burning challenges confronting today's India. Similarly, the essay 'Should Writers Stay in Prison?' is suggestive of so many important issues reflexive of some of these challenges faced by the writers of tribal Indian state like Nagaland. Thus, issues like marking self-articulation as a right against all male-dominated discourses, claiming one's literary self against representations from the outside world, asserting orality as the mode of expression to reflect on the Naga traditional life and so on are some of the implied inhibitions raised in the essay in question. The metaphor of "prison" runs as a constant in the works of writers like Kire and Ao, because there is an urgent need to represent Nagaland or the Naga Experiences in today's cultural and political contexts. Although none of the creative and literary works of these two writers can be seen as literary masterpieces, one should be clear about the fact that these works bear testimony of several bitter experiences of a conflict-ridden North East Indian state like Nagaland.

NOTES

1. The rich tradition of storytelling and oral literature has had huge impact on the present day writings of Nagaland. The culture of Nagaland, a blend of different tribes like Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Pochury, Chang, Konyak, Phom, Khiamniungam, Yimchunger, Sangtam, Lotha, Zeliang, Sumi is reflexive of a diverse and colourful state with rich oral heritage and tradition.

2. The International Cities of Refuge Network, mostly known as ICORN, is an independent organisation of cities and regions based in Norway and offers shelter to writers and artists facing risks and threats, promoting freedom of expression, defending democratic values and international solidarity and so on. Because of what they do or write, many writers and artists often become vulnerable to hard censorship, harassment, imprisonment and even death. But, they also tend to be the first to speak out and resist when free speech is threatened. ICORN member cities offer long term, but temporary, shelter to those facing risks as a direct consequence of their creative activities. Kire received information about the ICORN in her trip to Norway and in 2005, and subsequently, she moved to Tromso from where she used to write her important works.
3. In *ICORN International Cities of Refuge Network*, Norway, Autumn 2006.
4. The brutality of life in Nagaland, especially the brutalisation of many young men made her fear for the safety of her children. Her older daughter was traumatised on a short trip when their car was stopped and they were held for questioning by a group holding them at gunpoint. Her sister came within five meters of being shot when armed men began to indiscriminately fire at their human target, felling an innocent citizen. Her own son was kidnapped for three days.
5. This essay is available in the book *The Peripheral Centre: Voices form India's Northeast*, edited by Preeti Gill and published by Zuban, New Delhi in 2010.

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