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## Easterine Kire's Fictions and Nagaland

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### Abstract

Nagaland is a storehouse of life stories. It is a tapestry where myth, legends, stories conglomerate with lived realities of a people. And Easterine Kire, a Naga writer, now a resident of Norway drawing on the various facets of the oral tradition and combining storytelling with legends and myths that abound the courtyards of her homeland becomes the keeper of a people's memories. This paper while approaching Nagaland as a space will try to understand how this space exists in relation to the myriad aspects unfolding in its courtyards like orality, collective memory, weapons, violence and how these aspects are inextricable in forging identities of people living in this space. Nagaland, for Kire, becomes what Michel Foucault terms as 'heterotopia' meaning a space which is a physical representation or approximation of a parallel space. A heterotopia according to Foucault can be a single space which juxtaposes several spaces (Foucault 1986: 22). For Kire Nagaland becomes a space juxtaposing several spaces for affirmation of difference but also at the same time a new route from where to chart a new understanding of the issues inextricably related to the society.

In Kire's fictions, we find a radical juxtaposition of societal realities and tradition. Owing to this we see how the mythical sleeping river in her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014) is juxtaposed with the violence to which the contemporary Naga society finds itself fettered. Similarly, we also decipher how traditional symbols like the Bitter wormwood, the nettle forest, weretigers etc. are brought up to contest the trajectories of violence and conflict. In her novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2012), the herb becomes a traditional artifact capable of acting as an antidote to violence and conflict. In the novel, its beneficial properties are repeatedly emphasized by the protagonist Mose. Similarly in *The Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) the author conjures from the past the myth of the tiger widow who would be impregnated by a single drop of rain and gives birth to a son who would avenge the death of his father by killing the spirit tiger but who in turn is destined to die at the hands of his own fellow beings. Kire's preoccupation with death in the novels as is evident through the death of all the three characters namely Mose in *Bitter Wormwood*, Vilie in *When the River Sleeps* and Rhalietuo in *The Son of the Thundercloud* is at once a reminder for the contemporary Naga society to seek refuge in the safe houses of tradition and it is also a reminder that it is the past with all its knowledge and its innate ability to heal

which will rescue a people from the complexities that abound their societies. Kire remembers Nagaland through its oral culture and myth.

## Introduction

Easterine Kire, poet, novelist, academic and singer, finds in the myths and tradition of Nagaland inherent stability to counteract the violent and the rather uncertain present. Nagaland the sixteenth state of postcolonial India, do not have a pleasant temporal framework to relate. It's present as well as past is fraught with deep scars of conflict between various factions who approach this space in accordance with their ideologies. It has been one of the disturbed North-Eastern states of India seeking independence from a nation they think they don't belong. As recent as in June 2018, bitter feuds between ultras belonging to NSCN (K) and the soldiers of Assam Rifles in Mon district of Nagaland emulate the trajectory of conflict which has been raging through the courtyards of Nagaland (Saikia 2018). Nagaland, owing to such ceaseless conflict has been repeatedly featured internationally as a conflict zone (Bhaumik 2015). Yet, in the midst of violence, there is a thriving diversity of people with diverse cultural coping mechanisms which help them in approaching this space marred by decades of conflict. Nagaland apart from being a space marred by conflict is also a storehouse of life stories. It is a tapestry where myth, legends, stories conglomerate with lived realities of a people. And Easterine Kire, a Naga writer, now a resident of Norway drawing on the various facets of the oral tradition and combining storytelling with legends and myths that abound the courtyards of her homeland becomes the keeper of a people's memories. This paper while approaching Nagaland as a space in Kire's novels namely novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), and *The Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) will try to understand how this space exists in relation to the myriad aspects unfolding in its courtyards like orality, collective memory, weapons, violence and how these aspects are inextricable in forging identities of people living in this space. Nagaland, for Kire, becomes what Michel Foucault terms as 'heterotopia' meaning a space which is a physical representation or approximation of a parallel space. A heterotopia according to Foucault can be a single space which juxtaposes several spaces (Foucault 1986: 22). For Kire Nagaland becomes a space juxtaposing several spaces for affirmation of difference but also at the same time a new route from where to chart a new understanding of the issues inextricably related to the society.

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Orality is one of the most important aspects of Kire's project of remembering her homeland. In one of her interviews, Kire has stressed that her writing is at once a project of documenting the rich Naga oral interface which is slowly eroding with the advent of modernity. Kire opines; "I kept writing because I felt we needed to create written Naga literature. We have many oral narratives dying out, it's all going to be lost" (Arora: 2012). The oral tradition from which Kire draws is what N. Scott Momaday calls; "tradition by which myths, legends, tales and lores of a people are formulated, communicated and preserved in language by word of mouth, as opposed to writing." (Momaday 1997: 84). Momaday is of the opinion that the basic orality of language is permanent; "We are all made of words that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of the verbal dimension" (Momaday 1997:162). The Naga society which is oral in its set up use various aspects of this tradition for serving moral purposes. Communities create and use myths as a community strengthening process, expressing and reweaving their sense of group cohesion. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) we find that knowledge considered to be important for the survival of a community are transmitted orally to the younger generations. The institution of the Age-group house into which children are initiated after puberty, and taught the ways of the village by an elder becomes pertinent for the survival of the community. The knowledge inherited by the protagonist of the novel Vilie from the Age-group house becomes useful for him during his journey to find the sleeping river. The knowledge inherited from the seer and elders of his village comes to his rescue when he encounters the were-tiger and the Kirphupfumia. The stern reminder that; "the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder." (Kire:2014) keeps on recurring throughout the novel emphasizing the importance of orally transmitted knowledge in the Naga society. Moreover, it also brings forward the very dynamic nature of oral tradition. It is not complete until and unless it contains the stories of all members of a community. The story of Vilie in *When the River Sleeps* (2012) must, therefore, be carried

forward by Ate's son Vibou. The question; "Do you think Vibou might want to go looking for the heart-stone when he grows up?" (Kire 2014: 241) leaves a tinge of hope for ensuring the survival of oral tradition. It emphasizes what the Kiowa storyteller Momaday talking about oral tradition asserts; "oral tradition is always one generation away from extinction".(Momaday 1997:167).

### **Traditional Knowledge in Bitter Wormwood (2011)**

In her novel, *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) Kire traces the involvement of Mose and his friends in the Naga struggle for Independence, and how they are caught in the quagmire of violence that finally ends up ripping their nation apart. In the novel, the very importance of the herb becomes worth analysis. Bitter wormwood since time immemorial has been considered by the Naga society to have a healing effect. From keeping away the bad spirits to curing diseases the herb has become a symbol of orally transmitted knowledge from one generation to another. Emphasizing the beneficial qualities of the herb Mose opines; "Grandmother says it keeps the spirit away. Well, actually she said that it kept away those bad spirits that caused you do bad things" (Kire 2011: 48). This healing effect of the herb is brought out through the portrayal of the participation of Mose and his friend Neituo in the Naga independence movement. Mose and Neituo after joining the revolution for a separate Naga state are frustrated with the revolution moving away from its set goals. They witness that the leaders of the revolution have started engaging in corrupt practices and the very spirit of the revolution has been used to harness self-centric gains. Disillusioned by the harsh realities surrounding the revolution they surrender and return back to the mainstream where Mose is killed by self-styled revolutionaries. This disillusionment is counteracted by the friendship which develops between Neibou-the grandson of Mose and Rakesh-the grandson of Himmat, a police officer who was engaged in Nagaland during the movement. The friendship which ensues between the grandsons of two warriors embodies the cathartic qualities of Bitter Wormwood. Their friendship like the healing effect of bitter wormwood is an anticipation of a new beginning for the state of Nagaland purged from its conflict-ridden past. This transmission of oral Knowledge not only enable them to remain rooted in their entire being but also provides them with artifacts from the past which reinvigorate their identities as a race with a self-sufficient socio-political and cultural system.

From the very moment, Mose is born the fact that he belongs to a race of warriors is emphasized. The midwife's prophecy; "Look at his forehead! Ohh... this one is going to be a warrior one day" (Kire 2011: 16) comes true with his participation in the war for independence. Similarly, the strong emphasis on naming a child the very moment it is born is related to certain believes which have been transferred orally. As the midwife points out;

"You should think of a name for him soon. I am sure your mother-in-law, Khrienuo, will have thought of something by now. Our people always name our

child as soon as they can, because naming them makes them members of the clan and protects them from being taken by spirits”(Kire 2011: 17).

The midwife stressing the importance of orally transmitted knowledge further explains to Vilau; “Knowledge of these things comes slowly, with life, with experience”( Kire 2011:17).

Experience and knowledge from the past which the midwife stresses enables the future generation to forge a new world out of conflict and violence. The friendship of Neituo and Rakesh, the two grandsons of two warriors fighting for two opposing factions is a testimony to the purgative effect of knowledge transferred orally. The Bitter wormwood of the novel, therefore, becomes symbolic of a new aura which emerges like a phoenix from the ashes of conflict. For this new world formed out of conflict and disorder to sustain itself Mose must sacrifice his own life to save a Bihari migrant and become symbolic of the purgative herb Bitter wormwood and also at the same time anticipate the words of the seer in Kire’s next novel *When The River Sleeps* (2014) “Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder”( Kire 2014: 31).

In the novel, the revolution is brought out as a sort of defensive mechanism to protect the autonomy of the Naga society. In the course of the novel, we learn that young revolutionaries are taught the art of remaining rooted to the calm yet asserting Naga spirit. Repeatedly it is stressed that the war is not against the Indians but to protect their homeland;

“This is not an ordinary war”. Shouted the officer, “this is a test of who has the stronger heart. The Indians may have more men and more guns, but this is our ancestral land to which we are bonded. The Indian soldier does not feel for the land as we do” (Kire 2011: 95).

Yet, there is a deep concern which surrounds the society which Mose inhabits. The killing of students by the police, the wailing of women in the streets of Kohima all point towards a gross erosion of the broad nature of Naga society. Talking about the erosion of humanitarian concern in the Naga society Neitou in the novel opines;

“We” began Neituo ominously. “are dying. That’s what is wrong with us. We are losing all human decency and sense of taboo. Human life is becoming worthless and utterly dispensable” ( Kire 2011: 52).

To which Mose replies in a tone of protest;

“Our culture is not like that at all. We grew up learning to respect life. Taboo breakers will come to a terrible end, we all know that” (Kire 2011: 152).

Yet it is Mose who would succumb to the catastrophic waves of violence that have engulfed the Naga society. But a break in the cycle of violence occurs when Neibou –Mose’s grandson refuses to avenge the death of his grandfather and realizes that forgiving and reconciliation are greater than revenge and bloodshed.

Like Neibou the Naga society must move gradually towards the threshold of forgiveness. The symbol of Neibou with a leaf of Bitter Wormwood tucked behind his ear aptly brings forward that necessity of forgiveness and the necessity of charting new routes to mitigating conflict in the Naga society. The penultimate stanza depicting Neibou standing in front of Mose's grave and inhaling the bitter wormwood leaf points towards a new dawn which slowly yet steadily is emerging in the blue hills of Nagaland and Neibou- a young educated Naga must lead the society towards a new trajectory which like the bitter wormwood can heal a nation's soul. Neibou must therefore become a stalwart who will lead forward the dynamic and all accommodating tradition of the Nagas.

### **Oral tradition in *When the River Sleeps* (2014)**

Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014) is a story about a man belonging to the Angami tribe named Vilie. Vilie lives a lonely life in the forest on the outskirts of his village. He is the protector of the Tragopan from poachers. Having adopted the forest as his wife, and thereby freeing himself from worldly concerns Vilie sets out in search of the mythical sleeping river in whose deep chasms lies a stone that will give him untold powers. It is a quest which is perilous for not only must he learn to overcome vengeful spirits, malicious sorceresses, there are men- his own brethren- armed with guns on his trail. The journey for the search of the mythical river is a journey into the collective identity and memory of the people of Nagaland (Kire: 2014).

Vilie's journey towards finding the sleeping river is also a journey which moves backward in time and space towards the ancient Naga society still untouched by catastrophic forces of modernity. Modernity is a way of experiencing life in all its manifestation in relation to the changes brought about by a tendency to become urban. Chief characteristics of modernity are rapid change, fragmentation of collective identity and insecurity (Childs 2000: 15-18). Modernity with its emphasis on the capacity of human beings to think rationally has taken away the relative nature of existence and have reduced human beings to mere rationalizing animals (Habermas 1981: 9).

Vilie, as is evident from the very beginning of the novel, is an inhabitant of the modern world. For instance, he is working for the forest department as the protector of the wildlife. Similarly the presence of the Nepali woodcutters signifying migration of diverse ethnic groups to Nagaland all point towards Vilie being a Naga belonging to the modern society. So, this brings us to the pertinent question why is Vilie obsessed with finding the sleeping river? Why is the ancient Naga rituals, beliefs and taboos brought up by Kire? What is the importance of these stories in the modern context? Talking about the importance of stories the Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri has stated; "Stories can be either bacteria or light; they can infect a system or illuminate a world" (Okri 1997: 47). Stories in the context of the Naga society are those which have been transferred orally through generations. These stories from the oral tradition give the Naga society a new

dimension towards leading their life. Thwarted by conflict there is a strong desire on the part of these societies to revert back to a tradition which appears to be consoling in the midst of the change and disorder.

The mythical symbols like the widows, the weretiger, the heart stones etc are aroused to contest a modern symbol of violence namely the gun. Yet, it is the gun the modern symbol of violence which is appropriated by Vilie at times in the novel. For instance while encountering the weretiger Vilie fires a few shots at it. Similarly, he also promises the Nepali woodcutter that he would purchase for him a gun once he returns from his pilgrimage. The conglomeration of the mythical symbols with that of a new symbol namely the gun which has been raging like a wildfire in the courtyards of the Naga society points to a new and radical appropriation of the oral tradition by Easterine Kire. Wolfgang Hochbruk points out that in texts written by writers belonging to indigenous communities there is a strong impression that the continuation of traditional orality is desired by the text. For instance, in the novel, Kire employs scenes and passage which make use of materials from the oral tradition in such a way that makes the orality of the material easily recognizable even by members of those communities who do not have any intimate knowledge of the societies depicted in the text.( Hochbruk 1996: 132-142). Hochbruk refers to this stance as “fabrication” of the oral tradition. This imagination of the oral tradition by Kire invokes a sense of the oral tradition thereby making her themes universally comprehensible. The readers understand that Vilie is caught in the midst of a rich oral tradition signified through his being able to find the sleeping river and wrest the heart stone from it and at the same time a member of a society which is raged violence at its most gruesome form as signified by a series of murders in as portrayed by Kire. The heart stone which he wrests from the sleeping river after successfully evading the dark sides of humanity brings about his downfall. The real world with its defying of all taboos and forebodings of tradition comes down heavily on Vilie. Vilie is killed, so are the Nepali Couple. But the triumph of the oral tradition is ensured with the emergence of the weretiger who suddenly devours the murderer thereby nullifying the power of the gun in comparison to the power of the spirit. During his final moments of death Vilie so as to contest the murderer searches for his gun;

Vilie debated whether he had time to run for his gun, or if he should make use of the spade to defend himself.

“That’s right, get your gun and threaten me with it,” snarled the man as though reading his thoughts. “You’re not much of a man without your gun, are you?”...

They both sprang in the same instant, Vilie for his gun, and the stranger, knife raised to strike him. In the next instant, he was on top of Vilie pinning him down as Vilie struggled desperately to free himself. Vilie felt a sharp stab in his side and the searing pain that followed arrested his struggle. The man had a long knife with which he stabbed Vilie again and again, with ease of a man skilled at using a

deadly weapon. The brutal assault suddenly ended when the intruder was knocked to the ground by a tremendous blow.

The killer had been so preoccupied with Vilie that he never saw the tiger until it was too late. Leaping out of the forest, the weretiger pounced on its prey and iron claws ripped into helpless skin( Kire 2014: 231).

The weretiger is in its essence an oral symbol. Among the AngamiNagas there is a belief that certain men practice a closely guarded art of transforming their spirits into tigers. Vilie's encounter with the tiger conjures in great details the collective folk tradition and their ritualistic practice of the Angami tribe ;

"Among the Angamis, the weretiger ritual was a closely guarded one. Men whose spirits were turning into weretigers would begin to behave strangely. They would stop and stare for long periods at an object not visible to anyone else. Some men pounced on cattle and scratched them, all the while making grunting and mewling sounds. Those whose spirits had already become grown tigers gnawed on raw meat when their tigers had had a kill... It is not only the tigers that men transform themselves into. There are men in the other tribes who have been known to turn their spirits into giant snakes, and their women's spirits have become monkeys" (Kire 2014: 27-28).

The death of the murderer without the use of the modern symbol of violence the gun reinforces the words of the seer at the beginning of the novel;

"Take your gun with you but use it sparingly. Sometimes the struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual powers which you would be quite foolish to defy with gunpowder" (Kire 2014: 31).

Another symbol which draws on the oral tradition in the novel is the myth of Kirhupfumia. Kirhupfumia in Angami tradition refers to a woman who is believed to have magical powers including the power of bringing death to any individual by pointing their fingers at them. Kirhupfumia were generally outcasted by the villagers. They lived their lives in villages far away from other inhabitants. In the novel, the myth of Kirhupfumia is played out by the novelist by bringing into the scene two sisters namely Ate and Zote. Vilie while returning after wresting the heart stone from the mythical river encounters them in the village of Kirhupfumia. The village for Vilie as well as the readers becomes a space where two opposing forces wrestle with one another. Zote, tall and furious in her appearance becomes symbolic of the anarchy that the contemporary Naga society is undergoing. Zote's gesture while meeting Vilie is not at all welcoming. Encountering Zote for the first time Vilie notes; "A tall woman with long hair stood with her hands on her hips, watching him with her lips drawn back to reveal her teeth. She looked like a dog about to attack" ( Kire 2014: 128). At that very moment, there is also the appearance of Ate; the younger sister of Zote calmer and welcoming in her gesture towards Vilie. It is Ate who shields Vilie from the viciousness of Zote. As Vilie narrates; "At least the younger woman looked pleasant and certainly more welcoming than the older woman, so Vilie let her lead him to her house" ( Kire



2014: 128). The fact that Ate a woman outcaste by the mainstream comes to the rescue of Vilie becomes a theme worth examining in the context of the nature of oral tradition in the modern world. Momaday, in his essay entitled 'The Man Made of Words' have pointed out that for the writers belonging to the indigenous communities the appropriation of the myth to suit a contemporary context becomes pre-eminent. The fact that in a culture which is chiefly oral in its constitution; it is the future generation who must push the traditional context into the future ( Momaday 1979). The viciousness traditional associated with these women having the power of death at their fingertips, therefore, is appropriated by the novelist to suit the modern context in which the novel is placed. Ate, therefore, must break the stereotype associated the Kirhupfumia by protecting Vilie from Zote and later on leaving the village of Kirhupfumia and beginning a new life with Vilie at his ancestral village before he is murdered. The warm acceptance of Ate into Vilie family points to how orality in a changing world has been to use once again the words of Momaday "fabricated" to suit the context. And this fabrication portrayed through the warm acceptance of a Kirhupfumia into a village of so called normal human beings also at the same time brings out the dynamic nature of oral tradition.

### ***Son of the Thundercloud (2016) as an Oral Autobiography***

"Oral Autobiography" (Oumaron: 1994) is a genre in autobiographical writing that requires the presence of a second person to record the facts. Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud (2016)* entwines orality with autobiography. The novel traces the course of a man named Pele who after losing his family in a terrible famine leaves his village, never once looking back. Walking for miles through a landscape as despairing as his life he embarks upon the courtyards of two ancient women who have waited for the rain to come for more than four hundred years. These two legendary women lead him to the village of weavers where a prophecy is about to be fulfilled. A single drop of rain will impregnate the tiger-widow who have lost her husband and sons to the spirit-tiger. The son born out of the rain accompanied by the thunder will avenge the series of deaths by killing the spirit-tiger. Pele will help the tiger widow raise the boy. He will also witness miracles, death and also reach a realm where he will realize that love and life are timeless. Endowed with a rich sense of culture and history of a race Pele becomes the subject of his autobiography and the coauthor of the story of his life and that of his people (Kuper 1981:7-10). Pele's articulation of the lives of the members of his community is a stance of identity creation. Leigh Gilmore reminds us that autobiographical texts act as a site of identity creation. These texts produce cultural identities. The autobiographical nature of the novel stems from the fact that Pele while telling the story of his life also speaks about his culture. We learn of the wisdom of the Naga legends. The necessity of the survival of tradition is stressed. In one of the scenes from Nialhuo, Pele's ancestral village we become aware of the constant preoccupation of the ancient generation to transmit the age-old knowledge to the younger generation:

The older people of the village would often say, 'It's the best place to live in. We are blessed. Our young should not think there are lands better than this to build a home. They belong here, they must take the place of the ancestors'. They feared that if the young were not taught to love the village, it would soon be abandoned. They had seen it happen around them (Kire 2016:12).

Later on, we learn that the village has been ravaged by a famine killing most of its inhabitants. Pele too, after losing his family to the famine leaves his ancestral village. The destruction of the village so revered by the ancient generation is also at once an indicator of the changing dynamics of tradition. Yet the destruction of the village does not signify that the forces of tradition have become latent but to the very fact, that tradition is contextualized to meet the demands of time and space. Although the fear of the old people that the village would be abandoned comes true yet the wisdom of tradition and legend continue to be omnipresent. Pele, therefore, will as the novel progresses to meet the two old women who will claim to be living on hope for four hundred years. The ancient and the modern fuses together to make way for the son of the thundercloud to born out of the last remnant of tradition. Mesanuo- the tiger-widow whose husband and seven sons were killed by the tiger becomes the body where the new beginning takes place. The conglomeration of the myth and reality is portrayed by Kire through Pele's going back to the story about the tiger widow that he heard during his childhood :

In a small village of the Angamis, there lived an old woman. A tiger had killed her seven sons, and she spent long, lonely days waiting for hours when she would join them in death. One afternoon, a raindrop fell on her from the sky. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son...(Kire 2016: 39).

Yet, there is another famine that is raging the courtyards of the Naga society. Rhaliuetuo-the son of the thundercloud must not only end the famine by causing rains to come but at the same time, he must also endeavour to end the famine of stories and songs transmitted orally through generation. Mesanuo's gesture of consoling Pele by telling him that it is the famine of stories and songs which killed many more in comparison to the famine of crops; "No, 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" (Kire 2016: 48). Stressing about the importance of telling stories Easterine Kire in one of her address delivered at Norway opines :

"I believe that every story has its space in history... The imprisoning of stories can prevent the healing of a nation's soul. No one has the right to do this" (Kire:2004).

In the novel, therefore, the entwining of myth through the actual realization of the birth of Rhaliuetuo becomes symbolic of the importance of the oral tradition for the survival of the Naga tribe in face of the cankerous waves of modernity and change. The son of the thundercloud, therefore, will eventually save the race by killing the spirit-tiger but will also at the same time be killed by the malicious

nature of humankind. The “they” to whom Mesanuo-the tiger widow constantly refers are none other than inhabitants of her own society who have lost faith in the pillars of tradition and adopted a malicious way of existence. Rhalietuo saves the entire village by killing the spirit-tiger yet he himself is killed by a ploy plotted by the villagers. The novel is an ardent appeal to let the artifacts of the past guide the present. As Mesanuo in the novel opines; “Without stories, people are destined to suffer, and they allow the dark ones to enslave their mind and fill them with fear and sorrow and despair until they die” ( Kire 2016: 63). And Pele the autobiographical subject becomes the agency through whose eyes we visualize a large part of the culture of the Nagas. The novel, therefore, becomes what Chaibou Elhedji Oumaron calls in the African context “ Marginal autobiography” (Oumaron: 1994) - marginal in the sense that it belongs to a group of literary work emerging from a marginalized region of India seeking recognition in the mainstream academia.

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