

Exploring the Realist and Magic Realist Style in Easterine Kire's *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*

Dr. Rajni

Ph. D in English

Independent Researcher

Email: rahhihkw@gmail.com

Abstract

The concept of magical realism is not new, but it is an art form that is frequently neglected. It combines fantastical elements with real world settings, characters, and events. In other words, it is a way of portraying the world in a manner that transcends the boundaries of reality and creates a sense of wonder and awe in the reader. Easterine Kire's writing is a perfect example of magic realism, as she uses the supernatural elements of Naga folklore to create a sense of wonder and magic in her stories. Her writing style is poetic and lyrical, which adds to the enchanting quality of her work. Readers are transported to a world that is both familiar and alien, where myths and legends come alive to tell the story of the Naga people. Moreover, many of her stories are said to be the real folktales of the land, told around hearths in the evenings and living myths are ordinary in Kire's society. The purpose of this research paper to examine the story collection of Easterine Kire to bring out the traditional elements within some magic realist.

Keywords: Supernatural, Realities, Ecosystem, Magic Realism, Mammy-Wota, River Spirit, Earth Spirit, Contemporary, Uncharitable.

Introduction

Magic realism is a literary and artistic genre that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in Latin America. It combines elements of magical or extraordinary events with the ordinary and commonplace, creating a unique and interesting story. Magic realism incorporates magical or supernatural elements into ordinary happenings, blurring the lines between the two. Extraordinary events, like as talking animals or supernatural experiences, are portrayed matter of fact alongside commonplace events, making them appear completely realistic within the story. Magic realism stories are frequently set in everyday, recognizable locations and are also profoundly based in a certain cultural, historical, or geographical context. Despite its fantastic components, this provides a sense of plausibility. Symbolism and allegory are widely used in magical realism to explore complicated subjects and address social, political, or philosophical issues. The magical ingredients represent deeper truths or cultural values. Magic realist works frequently embrace ambiguity and open-endedness, allowing readers to engage with the story on various levels. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and *Midnight Children* by Salman Rushdie are two of the most recognized examples of magic realism, depicts all of the aforementioned elements.

The prominent novelist Easterine Kire has done a great job of introducing the world to the Naga folklore, which is full of history and mythology. The Naga folklore can be read in her books, *Son of Thundercloud*, *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* and others convey the Naga folklore, which is suffused with the element of magic-realism. The books are a unique blend of reality and fantasy, which weaves both the modern and the ancient belief-systems of the land. Kire's portrayal of the Naga people's beliefs and customs is both enlightening and touching. The first story, which is eponymous with the collection, *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear Man*, is a wise, effective account of long-term influence of an incident in the life of a supernatural creature.

Kire is renowned for incorporating elements of the rich Naga folklore and culture into her stories. Her work is distinctive and engrossing due to the seamless blending of magic realism and historical fiction. This is suggestive of one of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's remark about the surreal reality of Latin America; "Surrealism runs through the streets. It comes from the reality of Latin America" (Fetters). The reality of Naga culture is equally exotic, nay even more exotic than the surreal world of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Even though the stories are set in modern cities, Kire's works have an intimate cultural belief. Her writings are replete with the customs and recommendations of the elders of the community. There is a consistent feeling of the presence of a unique atmosphere.

"Forest Song" is a story in which the supernatural and the real are intermingled. At the end of the story, the supernatural has been made one with the malicious, foreboding, powerful, evil-intentioned masculinity. The sensitive system of the community and nature has been given expression with deep emotional tinge, like those of a young, deeply curious girl, Zeno. She is good, shy, curious, obedient, smart, intuitive and careful in dealing with something, as is evident in her sensing the intentions of Bise's father from his gaze or leer, despite her being a very young girl. She is reluctant to run errands to Bise's house. On account of her curiosity, she wants to know about the 'forest song', which her friend, Bano, tells her in exchange for Zeno's wrist-band. Zeno can verily be seen as the harmony of the community personified, also being a unique, alive character, and Pulie should be seen as the corruption in human nature which is detrimental to that natural harmony. The malicious lust already present in Pulie's psyche drives Zeno to a place from where she is unable to return to her parents. Bano is insistent upon this romantic angle, but she is curious for the details of the enchanting forest song. Bano tells her that, "When you hear a forest song, you should cover your ears and run. It's the song of the forest spirits. If you stop to listen, they draw you into woods and then keep you there for days and days, feeding you roots and worms" (Kire, Forest 11).

Zeno is taking meals for her father who is busy cutting down the trees for timber. On the way she is shocked to find Bise's father, Pulie, cutting wood. She senses that she must not be found by this man alone in the forest. When he moves away, she comes out of her hiding and runs away toward the fields in order to get as much away from this man as possible. She dares not look back as he starts running behind her. She keeps running with the hope of meeting someone in whose presence the evil man wouldn't try to assault her. Presently she arrives at a cottage and an old woman comes out, sees her and consoles her. Then Easterine Kire shifts the scene to twelve day later to Zeno's household, and we discover that she has been missing for these twelve days. Her mother wails for her, without any avail. The intermingling of the forest spirits ahead of Zeno and the masculine hunter behind her, both leading to her disappearance, have been shown to be the limiting factors to an innocent, pure girl. The forest spirits lure people

toward them with an enchanting, sweet music. If the listener doesn't cover his or her ears she loses control of herself and walks toward the direction of the music. On the other hand, a person runs with full force away from the portentous, phallic man. The causes and effects in the range between these two extremities bring about the loss of a little daughter to a family and of parents and siblings to a little girl. However, from the side of the writer, the ending has been left open. It is nowhere said what happened to her after, running away from Pulie, she reached and collapsed near the old woman in the forest. Instead her mother's wails and men's futile search efforts have been relayed to the reader. The two possibilities were that she was either safe or unsafe or dead. Furthermore, the exotic environment in her stories itself is an open end in the stories. As Mexican literary critic, Luis Leal said about magic realism: "If you can explain it, then it's not magic realism" (Raghnath).

"The New Road" is a story that emphasises the realism of the supernatural elements. The spirits are shown to be a forceful reality present and influencing lives and objects in the tangible, mundane world. This is a story regarding society's concern for the limitedness of humans in the face of nature. As magic realism is used in Isabel Allende's writing, such as *The House of the Spirits* to explore themes of love, family, and political change. Her literary style merges the magical and the mundane, generating a sense of enchantment. Allende's magical components are frequently used as metaphors for more serious emotional and societal challenges.

The incident which sets off the content of "The New Story" is the late arrival of the drunk brothers of Nino. They live in the town, having migrated from the village. The brothers get drunk in the town and amble down the newly built road, howling and making merry among themselves. Nino is warned by her mother-in-law of many drunk spirits that followed the brothers and in a stupefied state didn't harm any of the brothers. She cites their dangerous powers in the incident of a man found dead some days ago near a gate, beaten and killed by the spirits. The realistic tone of the story while describing the surreal causes and effects in motion is what makes it gripping. She asks Nino if she hears many noises during the night. She asks Nino to not let them wander after nine o'clock in the night. She says, "You don't know that people in the village never open their doors after nine at the night? You live in town, but you've forgotten the ways of the village. But the spirits never forget, they are the same in village and town. If you are late going home, they follow you, and if the door is opened, they enter the house with you" (Kire, "Road" 22).

The insistent realism of the story accentuates the deep roots the supernatural has grown into the lives of the Naga society. It dictates the way of life of the Naga people, and many other tribal societies. It is stories like this that highlight the damage that has been wreaked upon the indigenous society. It makes prominent the present reality of the tribal communities by supplying a burning contrast with what it was. The imbalance of many elements in the society has robbed the unique culture of its originality, where the whole ecosystem was in such harmony that it had a living spirit. The old woman represents the old fitness of society and the entire community, and the entire story serves as a warning from the old harmony to the current chaos.

The story "River and Earth" includes three or four African and Naga stories. It shows a coherence between the two cultures, the mythologies, thereby asserting the reality of the other world. It suggests that this reality is believed by only those who come to know it face to face. This story has river spirits, like the titular story's Rain-Maiden, Rahlie in *Son of Thundercloud*,

and the selfsame river spirits of “The New Road” many other stories. This also strengthens, by virtue of intertextuality, the vibrant complexity of the culture expressed through all the other works of the writer. The river spirits are the intangible ladies in the hotel where Balie opts for a room for night. His friend, Selhu warns him of his having no knowledge of that place, yet the drunken Balie goes heedlessly toward a danger. Selhu later describes that:

Hmmm, river spirits, no doubt. They've been seen in that big house before. It was a mistake to build on the river-bed. It angers the spirits, because it's taboo. River spirits are ethereally beautiful but they never let a man get a good night's sleep. I tried to warn you but you were in no state to listen . . . They're called mammy-wota in Nigeria, mother of the water. They are the most beautiful of spirits. They've been sighted frequently at African markets (Kire, “River” 31).

Balie’s mind was twisted under the impression of this sprained reality he experienced in the hotel. He ran as fast as he could to his friend Selhu’s lodge where his friend explained to him the supernatural things and told him stories from Africa. The first part of the story contains a tale from Africa's Nigeria. Josephus is entranced inundately by a river spirit, a mammy-wota as soon as he casts a sidelong glance at her. In Josephus' life, all of the mythology about a mammy-wota, which means ‘mother of the river’ comes true. The influence of the lady, the river spirit, is relayed through the talk of people in the town, like in the novel *Anna Karenina*, by Leo Tolstoy, of which the gatherings of elite society are an integral part. This stresses upon the casual existence of supernatural alongwith the mundane. But, as is said in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* about things not being good or bad rather it being a matter of thinking, it was Josephus himself who was responsible for his own predicament. He was too weak to control his mind, and so too weak to survive in the mess he created. His elders recognise that the case has been lost when Josephus' house fills with stench and police break in to find his dead body. The elders talk among themselves after their unfruitful rendezvous: “Well, like any other mammy-wota, so beautiful that words fail to describe her beauty. Mammy-wota, mother of the river, she'll give young Joseph great wealth, she already has, no doubt. But she'll take her reward. No man who marries a mammy-wota dies old. They like them young” (Kire, River 29).

Amiri Baraka, an American writer, coined the term “Afro-Surreal Expressionism” (Adams) in 1974, to stand for the methods adopted by black authors to express the unique inner reality. Kiersten Adams comments upon black writers’ use of surrealism to express the formless angst permeating the society, in the like manner of Easterine Kire. She mentions Toni Morrison, Yatasha Womack, Larn Bakare, and their use of surrealism in their works. This super-realism, at the individual writer’s level, resembles the collective surrealism of the Naga and African societies. This is a personal or native method of expressing one’s aspirations and complaints. “Afro-surrealism as a component of the black arts movement that takes our world and creates different scenscape that is still relatively connected to this one; and black artists have chosen to use this genre to express their feelings of worry, liberty, and injustice” (Adams).

The story of Balie, who couldn't touch what he saw as the body of a woman, and the story of Josephus, who was led to death by the obsession for a mother of river spirit, are the stories about the nature of river spirits. They haunt Balie and other inmates of the hotel because the hotel has been built on a riverbed, which is clearly a forced sprain on a part of nature. Balie’s

friend Selhu is the mouthpiece for details about the river-spirits, or mouthpiece for the traditions of the community.

Selhu also tells Balie a story from Africa, about his friend Beneme's father. The father was about to die, but a witchdoctor came and by the effect of his presence, two snail-like earth spirits started to move under the father's stomach skin, which he brought out through an incision he made in the skin and smashed them on the floor. Beneme's father got so fine that he lately took his hoe to fields to work, shouting at his family for not letting him work.

These stories can be read with lens of the decorum of human beings before the natural and the subtler, unknown world. When humans go wrong in their treatment of the reality, it is they themselves who suffer more. The blindness to the sensitive and reactive reality becomes so hefty that it takes a heavy toll on the people. Yet it also is a safe haven for those who are humble enough to not cross the boundary, even for knowledge. The man's quest for knowledge isn't always right, too. There are many things in the world and in life that should not be known. The characters like Selhu, the elders, the grandmother in the story "The New Road" should also be seen as retaining the mandatory humbleness and still living satisfying lives on top of that. That can well be taken as a suggestion from the present stories.

The story *The Man Who Went to Heaven* justify thus:

He frantically told his wife about his great blunder. She hid him under seven grain baskets and told the creature there was no one home but her. Nevertheless, the Tietheriü sniffed her way into their house, and said, 'I can smell his presence here?' Still sniffing, she went over to the seven grain-baskets under which the man lay crouching. She gnawed her way through the baskets until she reached the man's scalp. And then she sucked his brains out. That was the end of the first man who tried to live in heaven (Kire, "The Man" 52).

This is another tale about a man who tries to change his destiny through deception and deals with sky spirits, or heavenly beings. They are not shown to be dangerous or disease bringing like earth spirits and the river spirits. They are shown to be descending, with a light around them, from the sky to such a clear pond that its water tasted sweet like honey mixed dew to the gates of heaven. The owner of the pond cheated a young spirit into marriage, and kept her on earth. But one day she found out the truth and went back to heaven. A raven told him the way, and he reached the heaven and united with his family. But it is the evident law of nature that an earth man doesn't belong to heaven, when he has reached there not for the sake of goodness or kindness or renunciation, but to be with family. He takes it as lightly as he did his surroundings of his house on earth. This is the same law that appears in the other stories, and it is to respect reality and nature wherever it is necessary. A moral can be inferred from this story which would be similar to a doha from Kabir, in which he asks one to be content with the essentials or the basics. He was warned by his wife to not laugh at the weaver-females who looked like animals with pointy-snouts, who were called "Tietheriü" (Kire, The Man, 51). The man couldn't gag the guffaw with any willpower, as he was only an earth-man, when he looked first at a "Tietheriü" and the "Tietheriü" got angry, feeling insulted and got killed eventually.

Most of Kire's stories, while hailing from the very heart of Angami lives, showcase these tragic flaws which take their toll in the real lives. Humans in any society don't know much about

the laws of nature, and even less follow them. This is all pointed out through a strange, surrealistic reality. The spirits and their interaction with humans is replete with the spiritual values. Michiko Kakutani writes in his book a definition of magic realism: “a mirror of a reality in which the fantastic is frequently part of everyday life . . .” (Kakutani).

This story is presented in such a way that reminds one of old stories and Kire is aware enough to keep them in a modern setting, or to convey in some way that the stories are not taking place in the past. She presents it to be the reality of today, with many aspects of the contemporary scenarios. The earth man’s laughter at “Tietheriü” stands for his ignorance, which he shares with Josephus, Balie, Pulie, Nino's brothers, Selhu’s uncle and many more. The deceit with which he kept the lady with him stands for the uncharitable approach toward things.

Through a detailed analysis of the narrative structure, themes, and elements of magical realism present in the novel, we gained valuable insights into Kire’s unique storytelling approach. Kire skillfully combines the realist and magic realist styles to create a captivating and multi-layered narrative. The realist style serves as the foundation of the story, providing a realistic portrayal of the Naga society and its cultural and social dynamics. Through vivid descriptions and well-developed characters, Kire paints a realistic picture of the protagonist's journey and her struggles in a patriarchal society. Many characters who are dealt tragic ending are the ones who try to hoard, to possess something, while doing which they get distanced from the teachings of the elders which are nothing less than the way of life for people born in that tribe. Kire is insistent upon bringing to light those corners of her society which need light the most. Her works, through the surrealist tales of her land, tell the people of Nagaland about their weakness and ask for remedial.

Conclusion

The story collection *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* is another of the gems of Naga writing. Easterine Kire has brought out unique stories with great care from the hearts of the Naga and the Igbo cultures. It seems from her stories that all deal with the laws of reality which seem only empty talk to those who haven't seen such things, which can be believed only by a first-hand experience and her narration style is seems feel truly real. A practice of the laws toward these realities enumerated in the literature of the communities, with the belief that all this is true, would yield a great moral and spiritual book, but it would also suffice to show that all these social traditions are a way of life in harmony with the internal and the external world. When the spirits are names as forest spirits, river spirits, sky spirits, earth spirits and the like, it is conducive to the intent of the writer to conceive them as extensions of the nature, which can also be called as reality. Thus, by study of the laws of a society which has been thriving without much cultural influx for thousands of years, a way for a healthy relation with the natural world, with the sensitive ecosystem can be traced, and the literature suggests that it can be traced by controlling one's wild desires and passions. The corruption starts inside the human beings, as is seen in all the stories, and one who is being punished is also a human. An able lookout for the interaction patterns would bring in result the significance of old customs and realities. Easterine Kire’s writings bring out many facets of the lives of her native culture, and of the related communities across the world. Her literature is at the forefront of folk literature and tribal communities literature.

Works Cited

- Adams, Kiersten. *Afro-Surrealism: Embracing & Reconstructing the Absurdity of 'Right Now. Medium*, 12 May 2019, www.itskierstenadams.medium.com/afro-surrealism-embracing-reconstructing-the-absurdity-of-right-now-7521cc6ab27f.
- Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits: A Novel*. Atria Paperbacks, 2015.
- Byatt, A. S., and Philip Hensher. *Possession: A Romance*. Everyman's Library/Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Fetters, Ashley. *The Origins of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Magic Realism*. The Atlantic, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/04/the-origins-of-gabriel-garcia-marquezs-magical-realism/360861/.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Critic's Notebook; Telling Truth through Fantasy: Rushdie's Magic Realism." *The New York Times*, 24 Feb. 1989, www.nytimes.com/1989/02/24/books/critic-s-notebook-telling-truth-through-fantasy-rushdie-s-magic-realism.html.
- Kire, Easterine. *A Terrible Matriarchy*. New Delhi, 2007.
- . *Bitter Wormwood*. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011.
- . *Don't Run, My Love*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd, 2017.
- . *Mari*. HarperCollins Publishers, New Delhi, 2010.
- . *Son of the Thundercloud*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2016.
- . *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*. Seagull Books, 2021.
- Marquez, Garcia Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Avon, 1970.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Building A Surrealist Story*. Masterclass, 2021.
- . *Midnight's Children*. Vintage, 2021.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited G. R. Hibbard, Oxford UP, 2008.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Lulu. Com, 2016.
- Raghunath, Ruchita. "The Radical Potential of Magical Realism." *The Oxford Student*, May 2021, www.oxfordstudent.com/2021/05/13/the-radical-potential-of-magical-realism.