

A Folkloristic Study of Son of the Thundercloud

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ABSTRACT

Easterine Kire, a distinguished author and folklorist from Nagaland in Northeast India, is renowned for her sustained engagement with Naga folklore, oral traditions, and indigenous epistemologies. Her literary works consciously employ storytelling as a cultural strategy for preserving collective memory, cosmological beliefs, and mythic consciousness within Naga society. *Son of the Thundercloud* draws extensively from Naga mythological traditions to construct a narrative universe in which natural phenomena such as thunder, rain, landscapes, and seasonal rhythms are inseparable from spiritual forces and ancestral presence. Nature in the novel is not a passive backdrop but an active, sacred agent shaping human destiny and cosmological order.

This paper undertakes a folkloristic reading of *Son of the Thundercloud* through the intersecting frameworks of myth-ritual theory, reverential ecology, and magic realism. By examining mythic structures, ritual performances, and supernatural motifs embedded in the narrative, the study highlights how Kire recuperates indigenous worldviews that challenge linear, rationalist literary modes. The paper further analyses reverential ecology as articulated through ritualised interactions with the natural world, foregrounding ethical relations of reciprocity, respect, and moral responsibility. Additionally, the use of magic realism enables the seamless integration of mythic and material realities, normalising the presence of spirits and supernatural forces within everyday life. The study argues that *Son of the Thundercloud* functions as a contemporary re-articulation of Naga oral tradition, reaffirming indigenous knowledge systems while negotiating modern literary forms.

Keywords: Naga Folklore, Collective Memory, Thunder, Myth-Ritual Theory, Reverential Ecology, Magic Realism

INTRODUCTION

The literary engagement with folklore has long served as a crucial medium for articulating indigenous histories, belief systems, and cultural memory. In the context of Northeast India, where oral traditions continue to play a foundational role in social organisation and worldview formation, contemporary indigenous literature frequently operates at the intersection of myth, memory, and modern narrative forms. Among the prominent voices emerging from this region, Easterine Kire occupies a significant position as both a creative writer and cultural custodian. Her fiction consistently foregrounds Naga myths, legends, and ritual practices, situating them within lived experiences shaped by colonial history, missionary influence, and modernity.

Son of the Thundercloud stands out as a myth-inflected narrative that reimagines Naga cosmology through a literary lens while retaining its oral sensibility. The novel draws upon traditional myths concerning thunder beings, ancestral spirits, and sacred landscapes, embedding them within a story that reflects communal ethics and spiritual consciousness. Rather than presenting mythology as a distant or archaic system, Kire revitalises myth as a living framework through which human beings negotiate identity, morality, and ecological responsibility.

This paper approaches *Son of the Thundercloud* as a folkloristic text that bridges oral tradition and written literature. By employing myth-ritual theory, reverential ecology, and magic realism as analytical tools, the study explores how Kire's narrative preserves indigenous epistemologies while simultaneously engaging with

contemporary literary aesthetics. The paper argues that the novel functions not merely as a fictional work but as a cultural archive that sustains Naga worldview in an era of epistemic transition.

Folklore, Orality, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Folklore encompasses the expressive culture of a community, including myths, rituals, legends, songs, and belief practices transmitted primarily through oral means. Scholars such as Bascom (1965) and Dundes (1980) emphasise that folklore is not merely a collection of narratives but a dynamic system of meaning through which societies articulate values and negotiate social order. In indigenous contexts, folklore often functions as an epistemological framework, offering explanations for natural phenomena, ethical conduct, and cosmological relationships.

In Naga societies, oral tradition occupies a central role in shaping collective identity. Myths explaining the origins of clans, relationships with animals, and sacred landscapes are integral to social cohesion. These narratives encode ecological knowledge, ritual obligations, and ancestral memory, reinforcing a worldview in which humans, spirits, and nature coexist in a mutually sustaining relationship. As Finnegan (1992) observes, oral traditions are not static relics but adaptive systems that respond to historical change while preserving cultural continuity.

Kire's literary practice can be read as an extension of this oral continuum. By translating mythic structures into written form, she does not fossilise folklore; rather, she reactivates it for contemporary audiences. *Son of the Thundercloud* exemplifies this process by retaining oral narrative techniques—cyclical time, symbolic repetition, and communal voice—within a modern novelistic structure.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Myth-Ritual Theory

Myth-ritual theory, developed by scholars such as Frazer (1922) and later refined by Malinowski (1954), posits an intrinsic relationship between myth and ritual. Myths provide the narrative justification for rituals, while rituals enact myth in lived practice. From this perspective, myth is not merely a story but a charter for social and religious behaviour.

In indigenous societies, myths are frequently embedded within ritual cycles that regulate agricultural practices, seasonal transitions, and communal ceremonies. The recurrence of thunder, rain, and fertility motifs in *Son of the Thundercloud* reflects this myth-ritual continuum, where natural phenomena are interpreted through sacred narratives that guide ethical conduct.

For instance, the prophecy surrounding the birth of the “Son of the Thundercloud” reflects a mythic belief in divine intervention that restores balance to the world. The villagers believe that the child born under the sign of the thundercloud possesses extraordinary powers capable of overcoming destructive forces symbolised by the tiger. This prophecy functions similarly to ritual myths described by Malinowski, where myth legitimises communal belief and behaviour. As the narrative suggests, the coming of the child is perceived as a fulfilment of a sacred promise that will restore harmony between humans and nature:

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 (Kire 41).

Similarly, the reverence shown toward natural elements such as thunderclouds, forests, and animals reflects an animistic cosmology deeply embedded in ritual consciousness. The thundercloud itself operates as a sacred symbol, representing both divine power and fertility. The birth of the miraculous child during a thunderstorm evokes ritual associations with rain and agricultural renewal. In many indigenous traditions, storms and rain are interpreted as manifestations of spiritual forces that ensure the fertility of the land. The novel, therefore, situates the thundercloud as a mythic sign that signals the restoration of life after the devastation of famine-

“Young saplings that were not newly planted but had sprouted up overnight. There was no other way to describe it. They were healthy and straight and tall. He walked around the village and saw that rocks and stones were standing in places where there had been none before” (Kire 40)

Another significant moment occurs when the villagers collectively acknowledge the sacred nature of the child and place their hopes for protection and renewal upon him. This communal recognition resembles ritual acts of consecration, where a figure believed to possess divine power becomes central to collective faith and practice. The narrative thus mirrors the myth–ritual continuum described by Frazer, where mythic narratives explain and reinforce ritual expectations within the community.

Furthermore, the confrontation with the tiger—symbolising destructive natural forces—can also be interpreted through a myth–ritual lens. In many folkloric traditions, dangerous animals represent chaos that must be ritually subdued to maintain cosmic balance. The defeat of the tiger by the Son of the Thundercloud symbolises the triumph of sacred order over disorder, reinforcing the moral and cosmological values embedded in the community’s belief system-

“Ah, my son, my son, the prophecy is fulfilled! And you have been spared to me. Oh! My life is beautiful again” (Kire 131)

Another aspect that reinforces the myth–ritual continuum in the novel is the community’s relationship with natural cycles and subsistence life. The famine that devastates Pele’s village is not presented merely as an ecological disaster but as a disruption of the sacred balance between humans and nature. In many indigenous cosmologies, such imbalance is interpreted through mythic narratives that explain environmental crises as part of a moral or spiritual disorder. According to the novel described in chapters two and three, Pele’s departure from his ruined village and his wandering journey symbolise a transitional phase similar to ritual processes described by anthropologists, where separation from the familiar social world precedes transformation and renewal. When he eventually encounters the community awaiting the prophesied child, the narrative symbolically marks the restoration of cosmic order through the fulfilment of the mythic prophecy (Kire 16-23).

Moreover, the collective anticipation of the child’s birth itself resembles a form of ritual expectation embedded within communal belief. The villagers’ faith in the prophecy demonstrates how myth operates as a guiding framework for communal hope and social cohesion. Their belief that the “Son of the Thundercloud” will defeat the destructive tiger and restore harmony echoes the myth–ritual pattern identified by Frazer, where mythic figures embody regenerative forces connected with fertility, protection, and renewal. The birth of the child during a thunderstorm carries symbolic resonance, evoking ritual associations with rain and agricultural fertility. Thunder and rain, often perceived as manifestations of divine agency in many indigenous traditions, signify the restoration of life after devastation. Thus, the narrative moment of the child’s birth not only fulfils a mythic prophecy but also symbolically enacts the renewal of the natural and social order within the community.

Through these narrative elements, Kire’s novel demonstrates how mythic storytelling functions as a cultural framework that interprets natural phenomena, legitimises communal beliefs, and symbolically enacts ritual values. The text, therefore, exemplifies the principles of myth–ritual theory by illustrating how mythic narratives guide the ethical and spiritual orientation of the community.

Reverential Ecology

Reverential ecology refers to belief systems that conceptualise nature as sacred and animate, demanding respect and moral accountability from human beings. Unlike modern utilitarian approaches to the environment, reverential ecology emphasises reciprocity and restraint. Indigenous ecological worldviews often articulate this reverence through myths, taboos, and ritual observances (Grim, 2001).

In Naga cosmology, mountains, rivers, forests, and weather phenomena are imbued with spiritual significance. Kire’s novel reflects this ecological consciousness by portraying nature as an active participant in human affairs, capable of blessing or retribution depending on human conduct (Sharma, 2022).

The story also shows reverential ecology by depicting landscapes as places where spirits dwell rather than as neutral geographical settings. In the novel, Kire depicts (Kire 18-21), forests and mountains as sacred places that shape how people live and make choices. As Pele leaves his village, which is suffering from famine, and travels through unfamiliar land, nature becomes an important part of his journey. The forests offer protection and direction, making it seem as if nature has an innate wisdom that helps those who approach it with humility. This depiction corresponds with indigenous ecological viewpoints that regard the landscape as a sentient being with which humans engage in reciprocal relationships.

Also, the communal life depicted in the novel reflects an ecological ethic of respect and restraint. The villagers don't want to control nature; they just want to live in harmony with it and understand how much they depend on its rhythms. Their knowledge of storms, forests, and animals shows that they believe in animism, which says that everything in nature has a spirit and can act on its own. The thunderstorm that occurred when the prophesied child was born supports this idea, as the community sees it as a sign that nature is helping to restore balance to the world. The storm thus serves as a spiritual and ecological emblem of renewal, underscoring the profound connection between cosmic forces and human fate (Kire 39-42).

Also, the novel's reverent ecological consciousness is very similar to traditional Naga beliefs, which say that treating nature well is important for the health of the whole community. The story suggests that survival depends on keeping the environment in balance, not on exploiting it. As in chapter seventeen, Kire describes the people's consciousness through the Pele-

"Pele choose to walk long distances into the woods to collect materials for their house, taking care not to cut too many trees in the same area. His reason for going far from the mountaintop was that he did not wish to disturb the fragile ecology around the abandoned village site" (Kire 101-102).

Kire uses these images to create a literary world where nature is a holy force that is essential for human survival and moral direction. The novel is an example of reverential ecology because it puts an indigenous worldview that values humility, reciprocity, and moral duty to the environment at the centre of the story. By doing this, Son of the Thundercloud not only keeps parts of Naga ecological philosophy alive, but it also criticises modern utilitarian views that see nature as just a resource.

Magic Realism

Magic realism, as articulated by critics such as Faris (2004), enables the coexistence of the supernatural and the ordinary without narrative disruption. Unlike fantasy, magic realism treats magical elements as integral to reality rather than as escapist devices. For indigenous narratives, magic realism offers a literary mode that aligns closely with mythic perception, where spirits and natural forces are accepted aspects of everyday life.

The prophecy about the birth of the "Son of the Thundercloud" is one of the most important examples of magic realism in the novel. The villagers don't doubt the prophecy; they see it as a normal part of their worldview. The calm and matter-of-fact way the story tells of the child's miraculous birth doesn't try to explain or question how miraculous it is. The villagers see the thunder and rain as proof of the prophecy when the child is born during a thunderstorm. They see the event as part of the natural order rather than an unusual event (Kire 40).

The novel's depiction of the tiger that frightens the community is another example of magic realism. The tiger is more than just an animal; it is a symbol of destructive forces in the natural world that are almost supernatural. Its actions and the fear it causes go beyond what is normal, but the story fits this part of everyday life perfectly. The villagers know that the tiger is real and that it will be defeated, and they accept this as part of their lives. So, the story space where the tiger and the miraculous child finally meet is one where the magical and the real can exist without conflict (Kire 70-72).

The book also uses magic realism to show how close people and natural forces are to each other. People often think of natural things like thunder, storms, and the forest as having their own will and purpose. These elements have small but important effects on human life, which supports the idea that the physical and spiritual worlds are connected. Pele's travels through forests and other strange places show how the real world and the

supernatural can mix, as the environment seems to guide and shape his path. These moments show how Kire's story blends mythic perception with everyday life, allowing magical elements to grow naturally within the narrative structure (Kire 18–22).

Kire uses magic realism as a literary style that puts indigenous ways of knowing at the center of the story. The novel does not treat supernatural events as crazy or made-up; instead, it treats them as real parts of reality. In this way, "Son of the Thundercloud" goes against the dominant Western realist norms and supports the idea that indigenous ways of understanding the world are valid, where myth, nature, and human life all fit into a single cosmological framework.

Mythic Structure in Son of the Thundercloud

The central myth of Son of the Thundercloud revolves around a child born of thunder, symbolising the union between celestial forces and the human world. Thunder, in Naga mythology, is often associated with ancestral power, fertility, and divine authority. By anchoring the narrative in this mythic origin, Kire establishes a cosmology in which human life is inseparable from cosmic rhythms.

The novel's structure mirrors oral storytelling patterns, characterised by episodic progression and symbolic repetition. Rather than following a strictly linear plot, the narrative unfolds in cycles, echoing the seasonal and ritual rhythms of village life. This cyclical temporality challenges Western narrative conventions rooted in progress and causality, instead affirming an indigenous sense of time grounded in recurrence and continuity.

Ritual, Performance, and Collective Memory

Ritual performances occupy a central place in the novel, functioning as sites where myth is enacted and communal memory reinforced. Festivals, sacrificial rites, and seasonal observances are depicted not as background details but as pivotal moments shaping communal identity. These rituals reaffirm relationships between humans, ancestors, and the natural world.

From a folkloristic perspective, such ritual enactments serve as mnemonic devices that transmit cultural knowledge across generations. As Connerton (1989) argues, ritual performance constitutes a form of embodied memory, preserving tradition through repetitive action rather than textual preservation. Kire's narrative foregrounds this performative dimension, emphasising the continuity of indigenous knowledge despite historical disruptions.

This ritual aspect is clear in the community's shared activities that are shown in the text. Ritual gatherings are depicted as times when the villagers reaffirm their connection to supernatural beings and ancestral rituals. The community's enthusiasm about the birth of the "Son of the Thundercloud" is a ritualised way for them to show their faith. The villagers come together to talk about the prophecy and keep their faith in the miracle child who will bring peace and harmony back to their world. The myth about the child continues to be reinforced in the minds of everyone in the community through these acts of community participation-

There is also a strong link between storytelling and ritual performance in the text. Elders and community members tell the story of the tiger's destructive presence and the prophecy, turning myth into a living story that is acted out at community events. These story performances are like ritual recitations in many indigenous cultures, where myths are told in public places to reinforce cultural values and keep historical memory alive. By telling these stories again and again, younger generations will remember the community's shared memory and understand how important the prophesied child is in their cultural worldview.

Also, the climactic fight between the Son of the Thundercloud and the tiger can be seen as a symbolic ritual of restoration. When disorder threatens a community, many traditional societies perform ritualistic activities to bring the cosmos back into balance. The tiger's defeat refers to the return of peace between people, nature, and spiritual forces. The community's acceptance of this event as the realisation of prophecy solidifies the collective memory of the ritualistic narrative, which ensures its incorporation into the cultural heritage passed down to subsequent generations.

Another important part of the novel's ritual performance is how the community still believes in prophecy and storytelling traditions. The story shows that the villagers keep their hope alive by remembering the prophecy of the miraculous child who will defeat the spirit tiger over and over. These kinds of acts of remembrance are like ritual storytelling, where telling the same story over and over again keeps the community's moral and emotional strength strong. The story tells how the ancient sisters wait for hundreds of years for the rain that will come true the prophecy. This shows how ritualised belief keeps cultural memory alive over time. Their long wait shows how indigenous traditions can last through oral transmission and community faith-

".....they say that those of us who survived have done so because of the great hope of ancestors who used to say that our ancient misfortune will end when the Son of the Thundercloud is born. Everything will be transformed then. He will bring rain and mist that softens the soil, and the earth will sprout grains and grass again. There will be food and life. This is why we have been kept alive"(Kire 19).

The novel also shows how ritual actions are closely linked to the renewal of the environment. The villagers see the rain that comes after a long drought as a holy sign that the prophecy is coming true. In many indigenous cultures, rituals and myths that explain changes in the environment help people understand these kinds of natural events. The rain that falls from the thundercloud and eventually gets the tiger-widow pregnant and gives birth to the miraculous child is shown as a holy event instead of a normal one. This moment strengthens the idea that the community's understanding of the natural world is shaped by ritual knowledge and mythic stories-

".....the clouds passed over our village, and nothing happened. Nothing except for that one drop of rain. I felt the baby grow inside as soon as that drop landed on me"(Kire 36-37)

Another aspect of ritual performance is revealed through the community's unified reaction to the spirit tiger that frightens the village. Because the villagers were afraid of and respected the tiger, they did ritual acts to try to calm it down or control it. The tiger in the story is more than just an animal; it's a spirit that breaks up social and ecological harmony. In response, the community engages in group activities that are similar to rituals meant to restore cosmic balance, like making sacrifices and calling on the prophecy. These practices reflect the folkloric notion that ritual functions as a collective means of addressing crisis and reaffirming cultural identity (Kire 63–66).

Through these representations, "Son of the Thundercloud" demonstrates how ritual performance, storytelling, and collective belief operate as interconnected mechanisms that preserve cultural memory. Kire illustrates that indigenous knowledge systems are maintained not solely through written texts but also through communal enactment and oral tradition by portraying ritual practices integrated into daily life. The book supports Connerton's point that memory is embodied in ritual practice, which keeps cultural values and historical awareness alive in the community.

CONCLUSION

Son of the Thundercloud emerges as a significant folkloristic text that rearticulates Naga mythological consciousness through contemporary literary form. By employing myth-ritual structures, reverential ecological ethics, and magic realism, Easterine Kire revitalises indigenous epistemologies that challenge dominant rationalist narratives.

The novel functions as a cultural archive, preserving collective memory while engaging with present realities. Through its portrayal of sacred nature, ritual performance, and mythic continuity, the text affirms the enduring relevance of folklore as a living system of knowledge. This study underscores the importance of folkloristic approaches in literary analysis, particularly in contexts where oral tradition remains a vital source of cultural identity.

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