

The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics

A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking
Double-blind, Peer-reviewed and Open Access Journal in English



Vol. 5 Issue 2 Monsoon Edition 2025 e-ISSN 2583-1674 Page no. 112-122

www.literaryhrm.org
www.cavemarkpublications.com



Magic Realism as a Corrective Discourse to Counter Environmental Degradation and Violence in Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*

Hem Raj Bansal

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3364-047X>

Corresponding Author: Hem Raj Bansal, Associate Professor, Department of English,
School of Languages, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, India,
rajbansal24mar@gmail.com

Research Article

Keywords:

Anthropocentrism,
Ecology, Famine,
Hope, Magic Realism,
Nature

Article History

Received:

June 12, 2025

Revised:

June 16, 2025

Accepted:

July 1, 2025



ISSN 2583-1674 (SPL-JLH)



Abstract

Aim: *This paper aims to explore the use of magic realism in Easterine Kire's Son of the Thundercloud as a narrative strategy to blend myth, memory, and lived reality. It seeks to analyze how the author employs magical elements within a realistic setting to reimagine Naga folklore, address historical trauma, and offer a vision of healing and regeneration.*

Methodology and Approaches: *This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, grounded in literary textual analysis, to examine Easterine Kire's Son of the Thundercloud through the framework of magic realism.*

Outcome: *This paper is expected to demonstrate how Easterine Kire employs magic realism as a powerful narrative tool to revitalize indigenous Naga myths and address themes of violence, loss, and renewal. It also highlights how Kire's use of magic realism contributes to a unique literary voice that bridges the local with the universal, affirming the value of indigenous storytelling in contemporary literature.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The conclusion establishes how the novelist employs magic realism to expose violence in present-day Northeast. Future research could compare Son of the Thundercloud with other global magic realist texts to highlight regional variations and thematic convergences, especially with works by writers from other indigenous or postcolonial cultures. Scholars might benefit from incorporating ethnographic or anthropological perspectives to deepen the understanding of the novel's mythic references and their cultural significance.*

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The contemporary threat to debilitating ecological balance is attributed to humans' injudicious harnessing of natural resources for personal greed. Over attention to anthropocentrism at the cost of other species inhabiting the earth has really been alarming. Too much attention to the comfort of man at the expense of ecology since the era of Enlightenment has been one of the main reasons for this imbalance. While the Enlightenment's thrust on values of liberty, equality and democracy ushered in a promising era, its over reliance on the infallibility of human reason and progress has been questioned in the twentieth century. Easterine Kire's (1959-) novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) is a timely allegory in a magical realist way to awaken humanity out of its slumber and take affirmative action to save the world from both the human degeneration into the grotesque and the resultant natural disasters. By using magic realist elements, the writer exposes how humanity's lack of concern for nature results in natural catastrophes. Set in the backdrop of a famine, the novel underscores the importance of treating nature and its inhabitants in a respectful and sensitive manner to restore balance. Magic realism has become a potent device at the hands of many writers to attack ills of varied sorts. As a Northeast writer, Easterine Kire is sensitive to the issue of violence, both to humans and nature. In this paper, an attempt would be made to show how natural disasters are a result of reckless human actions and how a resort to moral and judicious use of nature is the only way to save the planet.

Easterine Kire's novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) embodies various elements which sensitize humanity about the present pressing environmental concerns like cloud bursting, drought, famine, depleting natural water resources or the extinction of many wild species. For the Nagland-born Sweden settled writer, using elements from Naga folklore in a magic realist way becomes a potent tool to counter apathy of both, human to human and human to environment. "Magic realism demonstrates its hopeful scheme to supplement the realistic text through a corrective gesture, a means to overcome the insufficiencies of realism" (Simpkins 148). Characters in a magic realist text overpower themselves to cause positive change when confronted with numerous challenges be it ecological, political or social. "Magic realist texts do not posit a qualitative difference between magical and rational world views. Magic is first of all viewed

as an adjunct, a supplement, summoned by reason in moments of crisis” (Benyei 158). The plot of the novel revolves around Pelevosto who loses his parents, wife and children in a never-ending famine. Trudging over cracked dry land and overcome by fatigue, pain and hunger, he reaches an abandoned village where he encounters two gaunt women Kethonuo and Siedze who claim to be four hundred years old. The two women then lead him to the Village of Weavers where their third sister Mesanuo eventually conceives from a raindrop and gives birth to the eponymous character of the title. Named as Rhaliétuo, implying the redeemer, the child grows to bring about changes in the landscape as well as in the lives of people. His birth does not only end the famine but everything else is replenished. Moreover, Rhaliétuo kills the spirit tiger which had earlier killed seven sons and husband of a woman. This woman is his mother Mesanuo who leads a secluded life yet it is never revealed to Rhaliétuo. However, the same boy comes to be resented by the vile minded villagers and killed by the villainous Viphru during the hunting ceremony. It is this grief that causes the death of his mother. The story thus ends in a tragedy as the disconsolate mother loses her son and dies on the next night in an unfathomable grief.

This novel employs many postmodern devices to offer a powerful critique of contemporary society. Magical realistic elements abound in the novel to infuse it with a different take on reality. Myths, legends and folklore remain some essential though not indispensable elements of a magical realist text. The prophecy as recorded in the Prologue to the novel builds on such a folktale about a woman whose son and husband are killed by a spirit tiger. The mother in the Prologue who narrates this folktale to her little one claims that he would meet her in his life time. This woman who simultaneously is mythical and real is found in the fifth chapter of the novel. She is still alive, above three hundred years’ old and waiting for something miraculous to happen.

Another magic realist feature usually found in a magic realist text is that the plot does not develop in a conventional linear and chronological pattern. In the novel too we find “the fictional disruption of logic, linear space, identity and chronology” (Campa 213). Two human/e yet age-eluding characters Kethonuo and her sister Siedze, whom Pelevosto meets, make him wonder “Were they human or were they spirits?” (18). However, his doubts soon dissipate as he finds

them gentle, full of life and vivacity despite being hungry for four-hundred years. Though no human would live so long as they have for so many years, they have been waiting for the prophecy about the Son of the Thundercloud to be fulfilled and that their “ancient misfortune will end when the Son of the Thundercloud is born” (19). In a famine induced situation, these women have been “living on hope, eating hope” (20). Strangely enough these women have not even seen rain for all these years and when it rains after 700 years, it brings them a lot of joy and delight. In an interview, the novelist dwells on this aspect:

Dead things like 700-hundred-year-old seed grains came to life in the book when the rain, both a physical reality and a spiritual metaphor, comes to the famine devastated land. I believe that the valley of dead bones that parts of Naga society seems to resemble can come back to life when a deeply transforming, identity-changing rain falls on us. It’s not too late. It can come from the work that bodies like the Forum for Naga Reconciliation are committed to. (*Naga Republic* n.pag.)

Kethonuo and Siedze in the novel have got the same magical powers as the old man in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s (1927-2014) “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” (1968) has got. Though both seem to be feeble, emaciated and gaunt, being old does not prevent them from performing miraculous functions. While in the novel, Kethonuo and Siedze prepare the ultimate spear point to enable the Son of the Thundercloud, i.e., Rhalietuo to kill the spirit tiger, in Garcia’s story, the wings give the old man both enabling and disabling qualities. While venerated in the earlier part, the old man is ill-treated in the later one. Similarly, though old women live long enough to redeem the villagers of the spirit-tiger, they simultaneously come to be detested, scoffed at and condemned as “witches.” In both the cases, the respective writers want the humanity to stop treating others as aliens simply just because they do not fit into their preordained lopsided understanding of things. “For Naga people of my generation, we have no problem in accepting the co-existence of the spirit world with the natural world. In fact, it is arrogant to presume that there is only one reality - the natural world of the senses” (Kire Interview).

Death in some postmodern texts is shown as something in the hands of these characters than in some extraterrestrial force. The two sisters in the novel

have kept themselves alive at will just to see the prophecy fulfilled. Moreover, even the woman referred to in the Prologue as “the saddest person alive” (9) turns out to be their sister. Additionally, it is through some invisible power only that they learn about their sister’s pregnancy. The transformation of the lower part of their body into some ethereal spirit-like form further situates them in such a state where they continue to wait for the propitious time to see something constructive happen. Apart from it, their warning to Mesanuo to leave their place the next day further elaborates this notion of death as something self-willed or “radical reconstitution of God” (Simon et al 416). Moreover, “the active participation of divine will (“it is in God’s hands”) is substantially discounted” (Simon et al 416).

Magic realist works also embody an inherent undercurrent of resistance to some pressing contemporary concerns. “The device of magical realism enables the writer to critique belief, memory, and the imagination” (Buchanan 314). Environmental degradation and violence are two predominant issues confronting society in the text. As a sensitive, progressive novelist, Kire is well-versed with violence in Nagaland in general and the entire world in particular. It is clearly evident in her novel *Bitter Wormwood* that deals with an unending cycle of generational violence. Violence perpetrated against human beings and environment is quite evident in the novel under discussion. The coming into life of entire vegetation, trees sprouting leaves and becoming green again, calling of the river and the earth as ‘the mother’ show how miraculous the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud is. Mesanuo adopts an earth-centric approach while offering a piece of advice: “The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones, and grain, just as a mother births her offspring. The trees and the rocks are the sons of the earth. Take care of them and they will take care of you and your children” (47). Mesanuo offers this advice to the headman in the Village of Weavers in an eco-feminist way. Just as she had been ostracized by the entire village, similarly the earth also stands deserted by humans and hence the natural calamities/famines/disasters. Not allowed to have any social relation with anyone in the village, termed as possessing a spirit and the reason of her own sons’ and husband’s death, Mesanuo had been utterly neglected by the villagers. As a human mother, she stands completely deprived of her identity, similarly as the Mother Nature is neglected in the present times. Earth, like a mother, serves the role of a provider, yet too much

harnessing of it for greed triggers devastation. The concern for nature also comes to light during Pelevosto's making a home for himself on the hill when Mesanuo goes to see her sisters. He remains conscious that he must not disturb the ecological poise. He does not cut many trees in the same area so that the "fragile ecology" (102) around is not disturbed. He takes a balanced approach while using natural resources.

Mesanuo who had been deprived of her identity and called only a 'widow' during these years, suddenly commands respect among people when she gives birth to Rhaliétuo. Remindful of the treatment of a widow in Indian society or that of *osus* (outsiders) in *Things Fall Apart*, the writer offers a powerful critique of discrimination against a section of population, village, and nation on class, caste, race, gender and religious lines. Seen from this perspective, the novel also interrogates the prejudices that leave many a people the victims of unfounded hatred and the resultant physical and psychological violence perpetrated on them.

The novelist offers love as a panacea for violence of all kinds. Mesanuo's sisters see something extraordinary in Rhaliétuo and hence claim that he will kill the spirit tiger. However, they also warn her regarding the villagers' reception of him despite being good enough. "Many will admire him but they will fail to love him. Others will resent him for his goodness. It has always been this way. It is the dark side of humanity" (86). Eventually it is what happens as the unfounded bias and changed mood of the villagers affect Pele, Mesanuo and Rhaliétuo when they return to the Village of Weavers after seven years. The headman's doubting of Mesanuo as the "the tiger-widow has the visitor completely under her spell" (118). Pelevosto's shock is further aggravated by the headman's tenuous belief: "She had a lover. She must have had one; the whole village believes that now . . . People prefer to believe what is more plausible rather than what is miraculous" (116). Vicious and vile minded people spread such lies and even forget the fact that she was above three-hundred-year old.

The storm of hate engulfs the entire village. No longer believing in the prophecy, they rather think that it is the tiger which is saving them from the famine notwithstanding the fact that the same tiger could not protect them for the last three hundred years or so from famine. The presence of Rhaliétuo is resented. After Rhaliétuo kills the tiger with the special spear point, he rigorously follows

the rituals of tiger killing so that the villagers do not doubt his credibility. Like his father, the headman's son Viphru hates him when the village girls admire Rhalietuo for his brave act. By hatching a plot against the redeemer, and killing him in an inhuman way like an animal hiding behind the trees, the worst face of violence is seen. Goodness and the redeeming act of Rhalietuo are not reciprocated with the same feelings of admiration and gratitude but those of hatred and violence. The villain Viphru attempts to influence the other boys who had aimed spears at an animal (as they had falsely been told to believe so) and had thus killed Rhalietuo: "No, it's not our fault. The spirits of the forest have tricked us; they deceived our eyes into seeing a deer where a man stood. We have to tell the elders what happened. Tell them the truth. Don't be afraid. Don't lie" (135). His spiteful snigger and a look of "pure triumph" (136) on his face indicate how menacingly he wove this entire plot.

Mesanuo's anger at her son's death finds reflection in her placing the body in the center of the village and crying over it. It is akin to the grief of individuals placing their loved one's bodies on the roads as a mark of protest in the contemporary times. Over Mesanuo's decision of not allowing her body to be buried in the same village is thus ruminated over by Pele: "These people had killed her son, their sons were guilty, *but the parents were just as guilty because they had allowed their sons to believe in a lie*. Why should the boy be buried amongst people who had hated him in life?" (Emphasis mine 140). Kire shows how the children's minds are defiled by parents who remain accountable for sowing the seeds of love or hate in their offspring. In this village, the parents had spread hate since the beginning, became a bit milder when the rains returned and again became vindictive when the spirit tiger was killed. In this way, what remains as the most powerful question is to eradicate evils and stop them from germinating in the children's minds. People like headman and other parents are also guilty as instead of liberating their sons' minds, they stuff the same with countless lies and the truth remains completely ignored.

The novel projects love and forgiveness as the only ways to overcome violence and hatred. Despite the worst victim of both physical and psychological violence, Mesanuo has got a streak of humaneness, love and forgiveness in abundance. When at the time of the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud the

headman seeks her forgiveness, she does so with good grace. After protesting later at the time of her son's death, she leaves the village which could not love her son, but again believes in the redeeming power of love and forgiveness. She lives only as long as she wanted to give birth to Rhaliutuo and become a reason for the harbinger of life to a dry land, but the moment her son is killed, she finds respite in eternal sleep. "*Son of the Thundercloud* is a story about love and forgiveness and it points to the world beyond this, which is part of the Christian tradition and also has a place in Naga tradition" (Pou).

Naming of the characters and places also serves as an important purpose to underscore the importance of empathy, love and forgiveness. Rhaliutuo, the Son of the Thundercloud, is called a redeemer as he redeems the villagers' from drought and fills the entire surroundings with rain, making everything spring with freshness and vivacity. Kethonuo signifies truth while her sister Siedze implies future. A society based on the value of truth would surely flourish and it is something which would ultimately lead to a safe future where both humans become sensitive to other humans and nature. Mesanuo again lives upto her name as 'the pure one' as the purity of heart makes her see through those trying times and moreover, Pelevosto was not her lover, as people in the village begin to doubt. Finally, the abandoned village is renamed as Nouzie which means compassion. Mesanuo does so in "the memory of her son's compassionate heart" (145).

Mesanuo pours her heart out. She says that now her purpose on the earth has been fulfilled: "I was to mother a son, not from the dust of the earth, but from rain, because water is the purest form of life you can find. It is a metaphor for true love. He would teach people how to love" (141). Her son was very innocent and pure-hearted and tries to spread the message of love but the corrupt hearted people kill the boy. She further talks about how the entire village did an injustice with her and her son: "They were consumed by hate. They hated others, but when you hate someone, you are really hating yourself and hurting yourself. Perhaps now they will learn to change; perhaps now they will stop hating" (141). Easterine Kire advocates a hate-free society where true love wins and reigns supreme

Magic as a disruptive tool acts to offer remedies to a world ridden with varied ills of grotesque materialism leading to the negligence of ecology. "The

politically and ontologically subversive strategies of magical realism offer innovative and humane ways” (Laws 3) to initiate reform in the present modes of living. Geographical, environmental and cultural contextualization of the novel quite suits the genre of magic realism. Since Naga society is constantly undergoing tremendous violence, the novelist quite sensitively exposes the ways out of this malaise through the much thought over plot. “Magical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death” (Arva 61).

Finally, the novel also employs the device of metafiction. Two worlds seem to come together simultaneously: the one embodied by Pele and the other of the prophecy. In both the cases, famines are common. It is famine which makes him leave his homeland and reach the world of the tale as narrated to him by his grandmother and also as part of folk wisdom. In common folklore, tales are told and distilled down the generations, but the listeners do not usually see these things happen on them. However, in the novel, the protagonist Pelevosto lives to experience the world of the tale himself. “Pele plays a supportive (decisive) role in the fulfillment of the prophecy concerning the Thundercloud’s son. He partakes in the reenactment of the tale and comes out of it as the central figure of the book” (Sankhil). “Catastrophes shock the readers, but Pelevotso, the Traveller, remains as the metaphor of optimism till the end” (Singh). *Son of the Thundercloud*, thus, serves as a timely intervention to counter ills of varied sorts by employing an optimistic vision.

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Hem Raj Bansal

Hem Raj Bansal is an Associate Professor of English in the Department of English, School of Languages at the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, India. He specializes in English literature and language studies and is actively involved in teaching, research, and academic development.