



SUPERNATURAL ELEMENTS IN AVINUO KIRE'S THE LAST LIGHT OF GLORY DAYS

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Abstract:

Avinuo Kire is a writer from Nagaland, a state in North-east, India. She lives in Kohima, Nagaland and teaches English at Kohima College, Kohima. She has written an anthology of short stories, *The power to forgive: And Other stories*, a collection of poetry, *Where Wild Flowers Grow*, co-authored a collection of oral narratives, *Naga Heritage Centre: People Stories*. In her book titled, *The last Light of Glory Days: Stories from Nagaland*, Avinuo talks about the history of the land full of conflict, untold sufferings of the people interlaced with myths and supernatural beings. It is so deeply rooted in tradition and community culture of her people. Naga people do not have a written record so folklores and myths are the repository of their origin and history. She has delved into the myths not only to preserve the uniqueness of her land but has also depicted and portrayed how the myths and traditional beliefs steep in supernatural are still rooted in the modern Naga society.

Introduction:

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary supernatural is 'relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe especially of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil departing from what is usual or normal especially so as to appear to transcend the laws of nature attributed to an invisible agent (such as a ghost or spirit).' In literature supernatural has been used to tell of the beliefs of a society in the paranormal dimensions and how it shaped the life and thoughts of the society as a whole.

The last Light of Glory Days is a collection of short stories divided into two parts. The third story in Part Two: *New Tales from an Old World*, titled *The Visitors*, Avinuo creates an atmosphere of strangeness through Khriesinuo's encounter with the Kamvüpfhi - demon warriors. This supernatural element is an indispensable part of the action of the story. The Old people of the society play their part as keepers and disseminator of their tribe's tradition and culture. An eight-year-old girl Khriesinuo has heard stories from her grandfather of the magnificently attired demon-warriors ululating war cries and jumping from one mountain top to the other. Her chance encounter with the dreaded Kamvüpfhi happened when she was invited to Aunty Neibou's kitchen as she was returning home from school. After being fed with freshly roasted corn, khriesinuo was told that she has to leave as it was getting late. To Khriesinuo's surprise Aunty Neibou seemed 'terribly anxious for her to leave. This was such stark contrast to her earlier welcoming behaviour' (The Visitors, 106) creating a mysterious atmosphere. Further intensifying the fear and dread Aunty Neibou 'turned towards her and squatted so that she could talk at eye level. Her mother always did this when she wanted to say something important' (The Visitors, 107). With a note of panic, Khriesinuo is asked to crawl underneath the table because some visitors are coming and 'urgently' (108) told her not to come out unless asked to. Soon she heard footsteps followed by a gust of wind that seemed not from 'outside but circulating inside the room' (The Visitors, 109). Creating a paranormal effect and a mystical experience there were 'giant shadows' (109) on the wall of the feared 'Kamvüpfhi', 'dark silhouettes of grotesque human-like faces and figures' (109). These 'Kamvüpfhi' had no 'solid figures' with only 'long sinewy limbs and majestic shapes of spears and shields' that moved from the floors to the walls and the ceilings. They were not creatures with flesh but shadows that grinned and grimaced. It was already dark when Khriesinuo woke up after being pulled out by Aunty Neibou's strong arms. To her surprise there was not a trace of the 'visitors'. Everything was intact and in place. She could no longer smell the sweet pungent smell of 'zutho' (a local rice brew) in the pots anymore and it tasted like plain water now. The essence of Naga culture is to accept things inexplicable; that is mysterious, beyond the physical and in the existence of supernatural powers in the universe. Aunty Neibou talked of 'Kamvüpfhi' residing in other villages and that the 'visitors' that day had come

from Chakhesang areas. She also talked about how human habitation and modernization is affecting them that they are going back to their own 'realm'.

In *When the Millet Fields Flower*, the fourth story in Part two, the readers are immediately drawn to the supernatural element and its impact on the protagonist of the story in the opening lines of the story, 'she awoke in a fright, hand clutching her throat, gasping for air.' Aleno could still feel the bristly touch of the enormous animal paw against her cheek, stroking her tenderly, almost lover-like; the gentlest of caresses.' (113). This is a compelling story of a young girl, Aleno, who falls in love with a 'Tekhumevi' (man-tiger). Temsula Ao writes that 'some persons have their souls which reside in a tiger' and the tiger spirit, 'is no different in appearance from other tigers in the forest except that the particular animal has a strong sense of affinity and attachment to the person whose soul or spirit he is supposed to embody' (T,Ao, 2012, p. 71 & 72). Temsula further adds that 'a person endowed with such tiger souls is supposed to possess certain supernatural powers' (T.Ao, 2012, p.73). Aleno takes care of her siblings, after the passing of her parents, by selling vegetables in the market. Sevizo, from Chakhabama village, sells his bamboo baskets, daos (machete), sometimes snails and frogs in the same market as Aleno. He had a strange habit of leaving in the middle of the day and disappearing for days. He never gave a satisfying reply whenever Aleno asked him about his disappearance. One time he came back to the market looking haggard, 'his eyes bleak and sunken' (117) and he made her feel uneasy sometimes though she is glad to have him back. It is a known fact that the phenomenon of becoming 'Tekhumevi' runs in Sevizo's family right from his great-great—grandfather 'turning their spirits into tigers' (121). Sevizo is also believed to be 'one'. This ancestral belief, the supernatural, is a deep rooted indispensable factor which cannot be ignored.

The Naga people were always conscious of the supernatural powers in the universe. The concept of pleasing and fear of displeasing the supernatural powers was strong in the lives of the people. According to the traditional belief of the Angami Naga, one of the tribes in Nagaland, 'God is pleased and obeyed by performing ceremonies. One of the most important ceremony and festival they observe is Kipfhünyi. Where the life of the people is dependent on agriculture, they celebrate kipfhünyi to offer food to the God. In praying that one will reap rice in abundance that will feed enough, they will offer food to the toad in a separate leaf asking blessings of richness in grains. Thus, when God is pleased in such a way, they will reap more and have prosperity that year' (Vikholienuo kire, 2019). Aleno's father once told her, 'our ancestors understood the laws of the physical and supernatural world and would always execute well-thought – out rituals and prayers before beginning or ending any activity. This is necessary to maintain the right balance between the two worlds' (125). All traditional practices were initiated by a man or a woman from 'Tsiekra Liede Yie' clan like during the harvest or plantation season. It was taboo to do anything before a ceremonial ritual. Aleno's father converted to Christianity and a year later he fell sick and died. 'Aleno was certain the ancestral spirits had punished father for becoming a christian' (128). The ancestors are believed to have the power to punish or reward the living. They punish those who violate the traditionally sanctioned code, and reward those who keep it.

The existence of these supernatural entities is acknowledged to the extent that the people are afraid of them. Returning home from the fields with vegetable filled 'khorü' (bamboo basket), 'the hair on her skin stood on end' (129) when Aleno sensed Sevizo's tiger prowling near her and heard a growl. Instinctively she began chanting 'Tei, Apfu, Kijü, Apfü (129) which means Sky, Father, Earth, Mother to placate the 'Tekhumevi' as it is believed that they desired to be worshipped and would leave if it is chanted. Though the growling was no longer heard, she still felt warm presence. Temsula writes, 'the big tiger is supposed to roam the whole countryside and gather information for the person about his relatives, friends, as well as other matters concerning his personal life and the community life of the village as a whole' (T.Ao, 2012, p.73). Next day at the market when Aleno was getting ready to leave, Sevizo asked, "So, Are you going to your garden today?" There was this 'unspoken understanding' (132) of the incident that they shared in the woods. Sevizo, then, seemed to Aleno an intimidating figure that smirked diabolically almost feline-like. Later that night Aleno was assaulted by nightmares where Sevizo was on all fours, in his human form, amidst the millet fields that was flowering. The nightmare continued when Sevizo's laughter turned to a 'savage growl' (133). The supernatural, these supernatural beings and manifestations seem to be unreal and surreal; but it does exist in the communities they operate and for the people. Aleno at one point when she began to doubt her knowledge, she is rudely made aware of her world as being peopled with supernatural elements, superstitions, spirit, deities and their influence. 'Just when she was beginning to question her sanity, Aleno finally heard the familiar sounds – supernatural shuffling behind the bushes' (134) by the side of the footpath she was walking. Temsula further writes of another aspect of the powers of a person with tiger soul, 'Though not totally evil, such persons are reputed to use their powers to take revenge on an enemy. Very often it is done by chasing the enemy, in his tiger-form, in order to frighten him...' (T.Ao, 2012, p.73). Almost as if irked by her silence the growls had turned to frightening snarls. Terrified she realised that if she wished to stay alive, she needs to please this supernatural being by chanting the litany her father taught her, the one she chanted before but words failed to come out of her mouth as the nightmarish sounds became louder and nearer. To her horror, 'all of a sudden, the tiger seemed to roar right into her face as she shut her eyes in fright. She could feel the creature's hot musty breath and its shadow looming over her. The roar seemed to reverberate as everything around her began to grow dim although it was a bright moonlit night.' Finally to placate the creature she began humming a familiar tune that calmed her fear though the tiger's presence was still near. Aleno did not see Sevizo again in the market after that though she hoped that she might see him again.

Spirituality is something that is natural to the Nagas and spiritual experience happens in different ways. There seem to be a thin line drawn between spiritual and physical world. In the world of the Nagas, there is no dividing line between the spiritual world and the physical world. In *The Light*, the young protagonist Khriemenuo first had a spiritual experience (encounter) early morning. 'Young Khriemenuo saw the light through the dew-whitened window on the wall beside her bed. A hush of silence enveloped her bed. It was early dawn.' (p.138). Instance of the Naga belief on the paranormal is Khriemenuo's calm acceptance of this unnatural light that streamed in through her window. It was so radiant she had to shield her eyes with her arm. Coincidentally it was her first maths tuition with Mr. Panduta, her new tutor. Soon her tuition with Mr. Panduta became an agonizing two hours of study. She began to dread this time as he bumped, brushed her body parts and touched her inappropriately. 'His behaviour confused and scared her' (140). Khriemenuo's second encounter with the light was when her mother asked her to serve tea to her tutor. 'As she took the tea-filled mug from her mother's slender fingers, the light appeared to radiate like a halo behind her mother's figure.' (141). This light did not frighten her as much as her tutor did. She longed for the light. One morning her parents left her alone with her tutor because her grandmother was ill. Taking advantage of the absence of elders, Mr. Panduta made his advances at her again, 'he appeared diabolical.' (149) Then 'Khriemenuo sensed a benevolent presence. Just as suddenly then, the room filled with light. It was as if someone had turned on the sun inside her bedroom' (150). Mr. Panduta also saw the 'light' bewildering and frightening him, rushing to the window to check where the light came from. With a wild look and without saying a word he rushed out the door and never returned. Khriemenuo never saw the light leaving her 'looking out the window with a longing in her heart.'

Indigenous knowledge of the Nagas is almost synonymous with supernatural. Evident throughout the story is the concept of "eco-spiritualism" as part of Indigenous wisdom, attributing divine power to nature. The traditional knowledge of the Nagas considers supernatural an important aspect and part of the natural world. Olio in *The Forest Spirit* was a hunter. Though he was studying in a school in a nearby town, whenever he is back in the village, he never failed to go to the forest. He knew the forest and he had 'an innate sense that the forest knew him' (154). One day on a camping trip Olio found a strange smooth stone that a white luminous glow beneath the shallow waters of the river. As he extracted the stone from the river bed, he 'felt a sudden gust of wind' (158). On the last day of his self-authorized holiday, Olio made another visit to the forest but to his surprise 'the forest was eerily quiet that afternoon' (159). No chirping and squawks of birds and to his disbelief he was lost. He felt movements around him but very swift. The forest is endowed with a living spirit as illustrated by Olio's experience. Easterine Kire comments on the spirituality of her people by saying - 'In the Tenyimia or Angami spiritual world, dreams connect us to the spiritual world and we get relevant messages for our lives through dreams.' (Imsong, 2018, p.174 &175). Tired and baffled, Olio fell asleep beneath a bamboo grove and in his dream he saw the forest spirit, 'a magnificent stag with antlers branching out, above and beyond, touching the highest treetops and spreading far into the surrounding forest' and when it came closer to his face 'the deer's face was amazingly humanlike, almost feminine' (160). In the hypnotizing 'deep-sea green and brown eyes' of the creature, Olio saw visions of him as a young boy hunting and returning home with his game and also vision of him gathering mushrooms. Then the creature said "Is this how you would repay my generosity?" (160). Realisation dawned upon him, it is the forest spirit. Drenched in sweat and heart thumping he woke up and returned home empty handed that day.

The Naga- man has always accepted and has also tried to balance what he knows and what is incomprehensible; that is, things natural and things mysterious. The two worlds that live in harmony: the natural world and the supernatural world. Olio's mother talks about the generosity of the forest, 'the forest has always been kind to our family. After your father passed, I found that all I had to do was step into the forest and I'd effortlessly find the fruits of the season without searching. I didn't know the forest like the men in our family but the forest knew me. It has always provided for us. We have enough. It would be wrong to claim what is not ours.' (162). Next morning he stopped by the forest to return the stone which rightfully belonged to the forest. 'The hairs on his neck and arms prickled and stood on end as he felt eyes on him, following his every move' (163). Feeling relieved he turned to look at the forest as he left after placing the stone in the same river bed, he saw the forest landscape rearranged its symmetry and appearing like the forest spirit.

The last story, in part 2 of the same book, *The Last Light of Glory Days*, titled *Longkhum*, Avinuo Kire brings the story of love and mourning effortlessly intertwined with the myth of Longkhum, a village in Mokokchung district of Nagaland. According to the popular Ao-Naga myth Longkhum is the place where the spirits of the dead rest for a while on their way to paradise. Another myth surrounding this village is that the soul stays back on the first visit. So one must go back a second time to retrieve back the soul. Sato and Keze, a young couple from Kohima visited Longkhum village exploring the sights and walked down 'the stone bridge cutting across the enchanting rhododendron forest' (171). Unfortunately Sato died and months later Keze takes a journey back to Longkhum alone. Fervently she prayed to Sato's soul that stayed back the first time they came and asked him to give her a sign of his presence. As she made her way back home the next day, overcome with fatigue she stopped her car and closed her eyes. Then she heard her name being whispered, "Keze, open your eyes". From the corner of her eye she felt a flicker of movement and as she turned she saw vibrant red and pink rhododendron blossoms. But as she ran towards the blossoms there was only green trees and silence. The supernatural experience continues with Keze giving it a bitter-sweet moment and a confirmation of the myth when a red rhododendron flower fell off her cardigan pocket.

Avinuo Kire has in these stories explored Naga myths and traditional beliefs and gave it a place in the contemporary naga world. Experiences, unique and peculiar to the people to serve as reminders to the whole community, their ancestors' rich tradition and beliefs are vividly woven into the many stories that the book tell. Through this thread of supernaturalism that runs through her stories we also detect a note of concern for the preservation of the oral tradition in a time when modernity is threatening the very fabric of Naga society.

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