MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES IN THE SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE AND TEMSULA AO

(Thesis submitted to Nagaland University in partial fulfillment of requirements for award of Ph.D degree in English)

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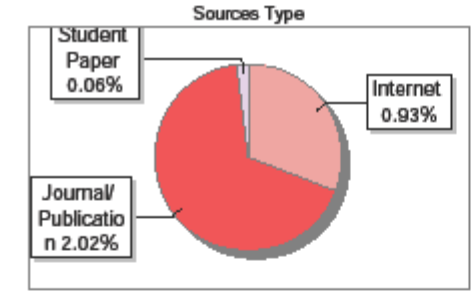

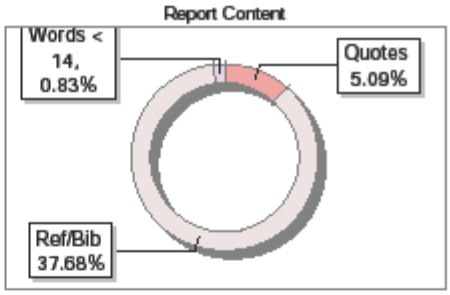

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Abstract

A discussion on moral and ethical values within indigenous literature, particularly in relation to the Naga community, invites critical reflection on cultural continuity, transformation, and identity. Naga society, rooted in a rich oral tradition and communal ethos, has long relied on customary practices and storytelling as means of transmitting values. However, the intrusion of colonial forces, the widespread conversion to Christianity, and the inevitable march of modernity have reshaped the moral structure of the community. This thesis investigates the representation of moral and ethical values in selected works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, two foundational voices in contemporary Naga literature.

Through close readings of *A Naga Village Remembered* and *Bitter Wormwood* by Kire, and *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for My Head* by Ao, this study explores how characters address ethical dilemmas during times of social and political change. This thesis examines how characters make moral decisions and face ethical challenges in times of social and political change. Their lives are shaped by inherited beliefs and the realities of the present, often pulling them in different directions. As traditional structures like the Morung begin to fade, and as communities deal with the impact of conflict or religious conversion, these perspectives call attention to important questions about what it means to remain true to one's culture while adapting to new circumstances.

Naga society has traditionally been shaped by a strong sense ofcommunity, where customary laws, oral storytelling, and collective decision-making played a central role. These practices were not only about the methods of governance and social

connection but also as a means of passing down values, ethics, and a moral understanding of how to live from one generation to the next. This moral foundation however has been deeply affected by historical shifts such as colonial rule, the spread of Christianity, prolonged armed conflict, and the interventions of the modern state have all disrupted norms and introduced new value systems. Therefore, this thesis examines how literature reflects, resists, and reconstructs moral and cultural transformations.

A strong sense of continuity runs through the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. Their writings not only preserve the past but also sustain indigenous ways of thinking, and adapting them to meet the needs of the present. Through their use of oral traditions and lived experience, they reflect on cultural change and show how communities continue to adapt and endure.

This study draws on postcolonial theory, literary ethics, and Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to explore how Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao create literary contexts, in which diverse ethical systems such as traditional, colonial, religious, and modernity is characterised by intersection, conflict, and interaction. This analysis focuses on the notion of social morality and the perception of moral displacement. Their work does not depict indigenous moral frameworks as lost, but shows how these values renew in response to challenge and change.

By viewing Kire and Ao as literary custodians of Naga moral and cultural knowledge, this research highlights their role in preserving, reinterpreting, and transmitting ethical perspectives through fiction. This custodianship comes through most evidently in *Bitter Wormwood*, as the pull between kinship and political

ideology brings into focus the moral dilemmas faced by individuals amidst complex armed conflict and political instability.

Through such narratives, Kire and Ao offer more than cultural representation by using fiction as a tool to critique on inherited systems of belief and value. This study also contributes to broader academic discussions on indigenous literature by examining how storytelling serves as a site for communities to revisit their moral heritage, reflect on its meaning, and adapt it to present-day realities.

This thesis argues that the writers' ethical consciousness is reflected to cultural vision and a response to continuity and strength. By blending tradition with narrative structure, Kire and Ao highlight ethical reflection by showing how indigenous values can endure and evolve in the face of rapid change. The characters' experiences shaped byloss, endurance, reconciliation, and renewal, reflect deeper questions about the survival and relevance of Indigenous worldviews within the pressures of global modernity. This tension can be approached through a framework of ethical responsiveness, cultural introspection, and narrative reclamation as a means of both resistance and renewal.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to Naga Culture and Naga Literature

Northeast India's culture shaped by diverse ethnic communities with unique cultural heritage stands exclusive because of the long standing culture of oral tradition which has remained as the major source of preserving cultural knowledge. Verbally passed down stories, songs and ritual practices have served as carriers of historical truths. It also served as informal education system where younger members of the community learn about their culture through modes like storytelling and songs. This practice has helped in shaping Naga identity which will be discussed in the proceeding sections.

Nagas were, and is a people who are community oriented and is closely connected with the land and the spiritual world. These interconnections form the moral foundation upon which their social life is built, and which in turn finds subtle and meaningful ways through their contemporary literary voices.

Modern Naga literature has emerged as a vital and powerful cultural and political space, making its presence felt through powerful literary figures. Although the written form of this literature is relatively new, it draws strength from an enduring oral tradition richly embedded in the culture. The transition from oral to written form is more than a shift in medium; it represents an act of preservation and resistance. For a people historically marooned first through colonial representations that reduced them to stereotypes, and later through political marginalisation and state neglect, writing becomes a way to assert identity and agency. It allows for the articulation of

experiences shaped by dispossession, conflict, and transformation. In this context, Naga literature is not just about recording stories; it is a deliberate act of remembering and reclaiming, of speaking in a world that has often refused to listen. It bridges the past with the present, grounding contemporary expression in indigenous knowledge systems, while carving out a space that is unmistakably their own.

Naga writers including Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have initiated a literary paradigm shift that goes beyond storytelling- exploring the moral truths and ethical struggles beneath them. Their works, often meditative and lyrical, attend to the everyday realities of Naga life, the pain of loss, the dignity of endurance, the imperatives of justice, and the spiritual longing for peace.

It is within this structure of cultural memory and ethical reflection that this study situates itself. The aim here is not simply to read Kire and Ao as representatives of a regional literary phenomenon, but to critically explore how their narratives focus and interrogate moral and ethical values within specific cultural contexts.

In this way, the study also reflects on the broader questions about how indigenous literatures articulate forms of moral knowledge that are distinct from, and often resistant to, dominant modernist framework. How do these writers draw upon indigenous belief systems and historical memories to propose alternative ethical frameworks? In what ways do their texts offer spaces for moral introspection, social reconciliation or cultural healing? And, importantly, how does literature become a site for resolving the tensions between traditional moral codes and contemporary dilemmas?

The moral and ethical values that shape Naga life are not distant or abstract ideals but are deeply embedded in the practices of daily living. In traditional Naga society, there were no written laws, but life was guided by shared communal codes of conduct, customary practices, and spiritual obligations that structured both personal behaviour and collective responsibility. These values were not only spoken or demonstrated through actions but they were also performed and preserved through literature, especially poetry. As noted, "Poetry was/is prominent feature of most of the tribes' literature. Through it, they expressed and professed their love affairs, marriages, tributes, cultural and moral values, religious values, reformation, enthronement, and contextual message" (Shikhu 35). Alongside poetry, early Nagas also drew upon lyrics, musical forms, and speeches to convey ethical lessons and social expectations. Through such expressive traditions, literature reflects cultural values as a medium for preservation and transmission.

In Naga society, identity was shaped through kinship, with belonging providing both security and meaning. Values like integrity, reciprocity, and respect were not just virtues but essential tools for living. Elders were respected for their wisdom, and although women were often restricted by patriarchal norms, their presence was essential to the value system of both family and village. However, these traditional values have come under increasing pressure due to colonial rule, missionary interventions, insurgency movements, and the encroachment of modernity. The ethical dilemmas faced by contemporary Nagas are thus not merely personal but deeply historical and political, reflecting the tensions and continuities in their social and cultural history.

Easterine Kire's novels, ranging from her debut novel *A Naga Village Remembered* to *When the River Sleeps*, offer a thoughtful return to the moral roots that continue to inform Naga identity, memory, and communal life. Kire does not look back on the past with nostalgia, nor does she turn away from its complexities. She instead brings forth stories from within the community, allowing the spiritual wisdom, ethical choices, and historical traumas of her characters to emerge with quiet intensity. Her narratives are often marked by a deep ecological awareness, where the land is never just as scene but as a living presence that participates meaningfully in the ethical life of community. For instance, in *When the River Sleeps* the protagonist's journey through the forest becomes a quest for spiritual fulfilment as well as a meditation on solitude, kindness, and self-restraint. The forest is not solely a place of danger alone but also a place of moral teaching where the traveller learns to listen, to wait, and to trust.

Kire's work is also attentive to the wounds of violence and the possibilities of forgiveness. In *Mari*, a story which takes place during the Second World War, she tells the story of a young Naga woman whose strength comes not from grand gestures, but through the quiet dignity of survival. The ethical impulse in the novel is not loud, but deep: to bear witness without hatred, to grieve without surrendering to despair. Kire's protagonists are not heroes in the conventional sense but they are ordinary people who go through loss, sustained by faith, and held together by memory. Their strength comes from a sense of clarity which enables them to choose dignity over revenge, and compassion over bitterness. As a result, Kire gives importance to everyday moral acts such as sharing, caring, remembering. These

small gestures carry quiet strength that helps to preserve ancestral knowledge and resist against the forces of historical and cultural loss.

Temsula Ao, in contrast, writes with a strong sense of political urgency. Her fiction also addresses complex moral questions without offering easy resolution. As a poet, short story writer, and ethnographer, she draws on the histories and communal life of the Nagas. Her collection *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* presents the violence of the Indo-Naga conflict with harsh honesty, insurgency, and betrayal. In stories like "The Last Song," Ao gives voice to those left out of official histories. She writes about women who are raped, men who are executed, and children who are orphaned. Although the violence in Ao's work is direct, it does not give in to despair or harm but they pose difficult question like what does justice mean when institutions fail, whether forgiveness can exist without truth, and to live ethically when trust has been destroyed.

Ao's poetic work often reflects a deep concern with how people live through grief, history, and memory. In poems such as "Stone-People from Lungterok" and "The Old Story Teller," she brings together myth, history, and personal loss. Her use of metaphor and silence speaks to the unspeakable losses that the community bears, and yet her language also carries the seeds of renewal. For Ao, memory is not only a way of holding on to the past, but a way of finding strength, restoring dignity, and affirming identity. As the storyteller in her poem reflects, "So I told stories…" (Ao 12) to keep the past alive, to honour those who are gone, and to remind the living of who they are.

Both Kire and Ao treat morality as something that grows out of lived experience than as strict code. In their writings, ethical understanding is formed through the decisions

individuals make amid uncertainty, suffering, and the search for meaning. Their stories explore the lives of individuals like women, elders, and spiritual seekers, who struggle with moral uncertainty, historical trauma, and a longing for peace. These literary figures are not morally certain but their choices arise from experience and reveal how communities make sense of right and wrong in difficult times. The moral imagination of these writers is fundamentally relational. Ethical life does not arise from an isolated self but unfolds through the relationships that bind self and others, between the individual and the community, the human and the non-human. It is within these connections that moral understanding becomes meaningful. This perspective becomes especially relevant given the challenges of our time.

In analysing Kire's and Ao's works, it is equally important to consider the methodological and theoretical implications of involving with indigenous moral frameworks. Literary criticism has too often approached indigenous writing either by offering superficial praise that overlooks complexity or by interpreting it through theoretical models that ignore cultural and historical specificity. This study, therefore, seeks and aims to avoid both tendencies by drawing its analysis in the lived experiences, historical contexts, and spiritual perspectives of the Naga people. It approaches literature as a form of cultural expression that plays a role in sustaining collective memory, and the imagining of alternative futures.

The significance of Kire and Ao's work extends beyond their literary contribution to a deeper ethical understanding shaped by loss and memory. By bearing witness to suffering, drawing from indigenous knowledge, and envisioning the possibility of healing, their writings perform a moral work that is both necessary and lasting. They

invite readers, Naga and non-Naga alike, to reconsider the meaning of justice, the nature of forgiveness, and the potential for reconciliation in the aftermath of conflict.

1.2 Origin and Migration of the Nagas

The migration and early history of the Naga tribes continue to raise important questions in both academic and political contexts. Most existing accounts are either based on colonial ethnography or oral traditions, and both come with limitations. Although the tribes are often described as having Mongoloid features, this kind of racial classification has little value today and is increasingly seen as problematic. The Nagas are spread across northeastern India and parts of Myanmar, but the ways they describe their origins and how these have been recorded, reshaped, or ignored, are just as important as where they came from.

The Nagas traditionally did not maintain written records. Instead, they relied on oral traditions, including myths, clan genealogies, and ritual narrations, to preserve and transmit historical knowledge across generations.

As Birendranath Datta notes, "The importance of oral tradition has come to be widely recognised in the context of tradition-oriented communities of the non-Western world, for whom the search for identity in the face of waves of change has become an extremely vital issue. In the newly emerging nationalities in Africa in particular, oral tradition has proved to be not only of great academic significance but also of immense practical value in the nation-building process" (Ao xiv).

Tribal legends play an important role in shaping how the migration of the Naga people is understood today. Unlike formal historical or anthropological accounts, these oral narratives are grounded in cultural memory and lived experience, and they

often reflect a worldview that doesn't follow timelines or written documentation. In the Poumai Naga oral tradition, a revered ancestral figure named Shiipfowo is believed to have guided their people from Irradaway Valley, crossing into present-day India through the Indo-Myanmar borderlands. The migration is believed to have culminated in Makhel, a site often described as a point of ancestral dispersal. According to legend, it was from Makhel that several Naga groups, including the Angami, Sema, and Tangkhul, began to branch out and form distinct tribes (Shikhu 7). The Konyak Nagas preserve a powerful origin narrative that places their emergence at a site of deep ancestral significance. According to their account, the ancestors "emerged from beneath a sacred rock and passed through a sun gate," an event remembered not simply as a journey from one land to the next but as "a symbolic transition marking a new beginning and identity." This story has been passed down through generations, carried in the words and rituals that continue to shape how the community understands its beginning (Wangsa 3-4). For the Ao Nagas, the origin narrative is rooted in Chungliyimti, a place regarded as sacred, where they believe their ancestors "emerged from six stones- three male and three female" (Bendangsashi 5). These stones are not merely physical markers but are understood to embody duality, fertility, and the beginning of life itself.

Although the details vary, these oral traditions follow a similar structure: they begin with the appearance of ancestors in a land held to be significant and continue as accounts concerning migration and settlement. Each narratives points to a story where we come from and speaks to a lasting relationship with land and kinship that continues to shape Naga identity. Carried through the lineage, these stories are told

and retold as part of how communities understand who they are and where they come from.

Linguistic and ethnographic evidence further supports this narrative of origin and movement. Research suggests that the Nagas migrated from regions to the east; particularly areas now part of Myanmar. "Linguistically, the Nagas predominantly speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family, a trait they share with many groups across Southeast Asia. Joshi writes that "The Nagas are an Indo-Mongoloid folk, living in the north-eastern hills of India, divided into over a dozen major tribes, speaking languages and dialects more than double the number of tribes. A preliminary knowledge of the Mongoloid or Sino-Tibetan and its impact on the composite culture of India and of its repercussions on Eastern India history is, therefore, a prerequisite to understand the racial elements in the Indian people and history of the Nagas as well" (Joshi 19). According to scholars such as Hutton, Mills, and Elwin, the cultural practices of the Nagas, such as headhunting rituals, communal feasts, and the use of totemic ornaments, reflect strong affinities with other Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups. These similarities reinforce the hypothesis of an eastern origin followed by a gradual westward migration (Elwin; Mills; Hutton).

As NeivetsoVenuh notes, the term "Naga" is a generic label referring to a group of tribes inhabiting the hills on both sides of the India–Myanmar border (Venuh 7). This transnational identity is crucial to understanding both the fluidity and complexity of their settlement patterns. Aye argues that Naga migration occurred in multiple waves. Tribes such as the Konyak, Sangtam, and Yimchunger first settled in the northwestern frontier of present-day Myanmar before moving into Nagaland (Aye 3).

These movements were dynamic and shaped by environmental pressures, inter-tribal conflict, and the search for arable land.

Historical geography also contributes to the understanding of Naga migration. Hargovind documents a south-to-north migration pattern within the Naga Hills. Tribes such as the Semas and Angamis moved from the Mao area into central and northern parts of present-day Nagaland (Joshi 37). These movements were influenced by environmental adaptation and socio-political negotiations. "Each tribe established and defended its territory, and pre-colonial tribal autonomy was marked by clearly defined village boundaries. This practice persisted until British colonisation disrupted traditional governance structures" (Venuh 15). The imposition of colonial borders, followed by integration into the Indian state, further fractured the Naga socio-political fabric. As Bendangangshi reflects, "the British bequeathed us to the Indian State; this, despite our demand of them to leave us free as they had first found us" (Bendangangshi 12). This political marginalisation is a recurring theme in contemporary Naga literature. Writers such as Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao reimagine migration myths as metaphors for displacement, identity, and resistance in the postcolonial context.

Despite extensive scholarly interest, the question of Naga origin remains unresolved. Shikhu highlights persistent gaps in state-sponsored scientific research. He observes, "Till today the origin of the Nagas remains inconclusive and shrouded in mystery despite much research… any initiative of scientific research has [not] been undertaken by the government or concerned group" (Shikhu 5). This lack of empirical investigation leaves the narrative dependent on oral histories, linguistic affiliations, and comparative cultural studies.

For generations, others have narrated this region's past, often through external interpretations that overlooked or misread Indigenous perspectives. In the past few decades, Indigenous communities have taken back the authority to tell their histories, shaped by memory, experience, and place. This shift reflects not only a renewal of cultural life but a clear move toward telling history on Indigenous terms.

1.3 The Origin of the Term 'Naga'

The word "Naga" has no single point of origin. Its meaning developed through long-standing contact between Indigenous communities, neighbouring populations, and colonial powers. In many cases, the name was not chosen by the people themselves. It was introduced by others, including Assamese and Burmese speakers, British officials, and writers of Sanskrit texts. Depending on the context, the word carried different meanings. Sometimes it reflected outsider views that cast these communities as inferior or uncivilised. At other times, it became a means of political recognition and collective self-identification. Over time, the term came to express a sense of shared belonging shaped by memory, struggle, and experience

"The etymological roots of the term Naga are diverse and contested, with scholars offering several competing theories. Claudius Ptolemy's second-century text *Geographia* refers to the "*Nagaloi*," interpreted as "the realm of the naked," marking one of the earliest documented uses of a term resembling Naga to describe the peoples of northeast India" (Shikhu 3). "Sanskrit-origin theories suggest that "*Nagna*" or "*Naaga*," meaning "naked" or "mountain," were terms possibly used to denote the physical appearance or geographic dwelling of the tribes" In Assamese and Bengali, similar-sounding words like "*Noga*" also translate to "*naked*,"

reinforcing the argument that these words carried derogatory implications when applied to hill tribes" (Sema 4).

Additionally, the Burmese word "*Naka*," meaning "people with pierced ears," points to visible cultural markers used by outsiders to categorise indigenous groups. Verrier Elwin adds another possibility from Tibeto-Burman linguistic roots, citing Nok, meaning "people," which may have offered a more neutral or even indigenous derivation (Elwin, qtd. in Imchen 150). These varying linguistic origins underscore that Naga was never a self-designated identity, but a term constructed through external perspectives.

Colonial interpretations of Naga were rooted within broader orientalist discourses that framed the hill tribes through lenses of primitiveness and exoticism. Early British administrators and ethnographers such as Captain J. Butler described the Naga people using Bengali terms like "*Nangla"* or "*Nanga"*, translating to "naked," "crude," or "barbarous" (Imchen 150). This classification echoed the colonial project's need to differentiate between the "civilized" and the "savage," thus justifying intervention, control, and Christian missionary activity. Hokishe Sema observes that the people from the Assam plains used Naga to describe the "naked people of the hills," highlighting how such labels reinforced cultural hierarchies between highland and lowland populations (Sema 4). These naming practices were not benign but deeply political, functioning as tools of marginalisation. Through selective attention to physical appearance and customs, colonial actors effectively erased the rich linguistic, spiritual, and political lives of the Naga tribes, reducing them to ethnographic curiosities in service of imperial narratives.

In contrast, indigenous interpretations have evolved over time, especially in the twentieth century, as the Naga people began to reclaim and redefine their collective identity. With the rise of Naga nationalism and ethno-political consciousness, the term was no longer merely a colonial label but a symbol of unity among more than 45 tribes speaking diverse dialects (Imchen 150). Writers such as Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have played critical roles in this reclamation by portraying Naga identity in literature as dynamic and multifaceted, shaped by oral traditions, colonial trauma, Christian conversion, and resistance politics. Their works highlight how writing in English, once a language of domination, has become a medium of cultural preservation and resistance. In this context, the term Naga evolves into what can be called a "moral identity," addressing existential issues and the politics of modernity. It is no longer a noun fixed in time but a verb representing an ongoing process of cultural becoming.

The term Naga shows that identity is never fixed. It changes depending on historical events, political pressures, and how people use and respond to language. Its origins are complex, with connections to Sanskrit, Assamese, Burmese, and various Tibeto-Burman languages. For much of its history, the word was used by outsiders to describe the people of the region, often in ways that reinforced their difference or placed them on the margins. As the years passed, Naga communities began using the word for themselves, giving it new meaning rooted in unity, struggle, and cultural strength.

Today, Naga refers to more than a group of hill communities. It has become a political and cultural identity that developed through conflict, struggle, and a long-standing demand for independence. For many Naga people, the question of identity

is not new. It is an issue that has persisted across generations. The use of the term itself reflects that process. Its history involves not only language but also power, concerning who has the power to speak, to define, and to represent. Consequently, the name carries both conflict and pride.

1.4 Importance of Ethical and Cultural Values in Naga Society

What we now call moral or ethical values were understood differently in traditional Naga society; they were simply part of how people lived. For example, respect for elders, acts of care, obedience, and listening. Relationships within the community were built by trust, support, and responsibilities. These values were not written rules but were passed down through oral traditions, rituals, and communal practices. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, ethics refers to the study of what is morally right and what is not, while morals relate to accepted standards of good or bad behaviour ("Ethics"; "Moral"). As M. Stephen notes, "The origin of 'ethics' comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which means custom or behaviour, whereas, morality comes from the Latin origin *mos* or *mores*, meaning character or conduct" (Stephen 11). In the Naga context, values such as honesty, loyalty, courage, generosity, and respect were not merely admired; they were regarded as essential foundations of social harmony and community life

A central institution within this social and moral framework was the *morung*: it is a traditional youth dormitory where young boys, and in some cases girls, received instruction not only in practical skills like farming, hunting, or self-defense, but also guided in social roles and ethical responsibilities. The morung functioned as not just a training center; rather, it served as a foundational place of learning where young

people came to understand what it meant to be part of a community. For instance, when someone acted unethically, it was not merely seen as a personal mistake but it as something that could unsettle the balance of the whole village as it affects both social trust and spiritual peace. Thus, maintaining ethical conduct was perceived as essential for communal well-being and spiritual safeguarding.

Although Naga society has undergone major changes due to colonialism, the spread of Christianity, and the regional political struggles, the foundational values of Naga ethics have remained intact. Christianity introduced new values such as personal salvation, forgiveness, and charity and it replaced earlier customs and beliefs. However, the core values of community bonds, respect for elders, and spiritual balance continue to shape and give meaning to Naga identity and conduct.

The writings Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao reflect a meaningful connection to tradition with the challenges and transformations of contemporary life. In *When the River Sleeps*, Kire narrates the story of a lone hunter whose journey through the forest becomes a search for spiritual clarity and a deeper sense of understanding in the natural world. His respect for nature and community echo values that remain deeply rooted in Naga culture. In *Bitter Wormwood,* Kire critically examines the ethical dilemmas of individuals' life and how political unrest affects ordinary lives in the face of violence. In her novel *A Naga Village Remembered,* Kire recounts the traumatic history of Khonoma village, portraying how ethical traditions and morals help community endure the wounds of war, and how identity remain connected in the Naga experience.

Similarly, in *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone,* Temsula Ao portrays ordinary individuals living through the harsh realities of conflict and

displacement, yet drawing strength from moral principles. Ao's characters carry the historical burden that reminds them of their roots and what they must protect. Her narratives emphasise that history is marked by struggle and hardship and despite pain and loss, inherited values remain strong. These values help shape identity and provide comfort and sense of belonging.

Both Kire and Ao connect tradition and modernity together in their works, affirming Naga values and critically examining and reinterpreting them to show how Naga morals and ethics can adapt and evolve. These values are not fixed traditions from the past, but evolving elements of Naga cultural identity that continue to respond contemporary challenges without losing their foundational principles.

In an era characterised by globalisation, political uncertainty, and cultural shifts, the moral and ethical traditions of Naga society continue to hold significance. They provide stability and identity amid change. This study, therefore, emphasises that these traditions are shaped by both historical and contemporary pressures, yet continue to play an active role in how Naga communities interpret and response to it.

1.5 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine how moral and ethical values are represented in selected works by Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, two important literary voices from Northeast India, particularly from the Naga community. Their writings draw from lived experience, oral tradition, and the historical memory of their people. As such, they engage with questions that are not only cultural and political, but also deeply moral.

The approach taken in this research is to understand morality and ethics as they are shaped by specific cultural and historical contexts. Values are seen not as fixed or universal, but as lived, tested, and interpreted through particular experiences. The focus is on how these ideas are conveyed through narrative, and how characters engage with the demands and consequences of ethical decision-making in ways that reflect the complexities of the societies they inhabit.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore how moral questions are built into the composition of the narratives and the evolution of characters. This includes examining how characters deal with moral uncertainty, and how their decisions reflect broader systems of belief and value. In *When the River Sleeps*, for example, the protagonist moves through a spiritual world that is also a moral one, where choices are rarely clear-cut.

2. To consider how traditional Naga values are maintained, questioned, or transformed in contemporary contexts. In *These Hills Called Home*, Ao's stories often depict individuals caught between inherited customs and the pressures of present-day realities. The study will look at how values are passed on, adapted, or resisted, and how these processes are reflected in the texts.

3. To contextualise ethical dilemmas within broader frameworks such as gender, violence, community, and belief. In both Kire and Ao's work, moral choices are shaped by relationships, collective experiences, and historical conditions. Attention will be given to how concepts such as justice, honour, and healing are informed by gender roles, spiritual beliefs, and the effects of conflict or displacement.

4. To examine how literature can both preserve moral traditions and question them. The texts under study draw on oral traditions and communal memory, but they also raise critical questions about the values passed down through generations. The study will explore how these works reflect, examine, and at times challenge the ethical assumptions rooted in cultural practices.

In short, the study aims to highlight the moral and ethical concerns at the heart of Kire and Ao's writing, showing how their work responds to lived experiences, cultural belief systems, and the social changes affecting the Naga community. It argues that Kire and Ao's works should not only be read as political or cultural texts but also as rich moral documents that engage with the complexities of human dignity, justice, and the 'good life'.

1.6 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in literary and cultural studies. It is grounded in the belief that literature functions as a powerful medium through which cultures express their deepest moral concerns, spiritual aspirations, and ethical conflicts.

The primary method of analysis will be a close reading of selected texts by Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. This involves paying detailed attention to language, imagery, structure, and thematic development to uncover how the texts explore questions of value, responsibility, and belief. The aim is to understand how moral meaning is shaped within the stories and how that meaning connects with the cultural and historical context in which the authors write.

At certain points, this will be supplemented by comparative analysis, particularly when similar themes or narrative strategies appear across different works. The intention is not to draw direct parallels, but to observe how each author engages differently with shared concerns. This approach allows the study to reflect the diversity of moral expression that can arise from a common cultural inheritance.

The study draws on theoretical ideas from postcolonial studies, ethics, theology, and cultural theory. These perspectives help situate the texts within larger intellectual conversations while remaining grounded in the specific cultural realities the authors address. They provide useful tools for thinking about how literature engages with questions of identity, belief, justice, and collective memory.

No empirical fieldwork, interviews, or surveys will be undertaken. The research is entirely text-based and interpretive, with an emphasis on literary analysis informed by cultural and philosophical inquiry.

Understanding the work of Kire and Ao requires perceptivity to the world they write from. Both authors are shaped by the oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and political histories of Nagaland. Their narratives often bring different voices into conversation, whether spiritual, traditional, colonial, or gendered. Postcolonial theory and Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and heteroglossia are especially useful for interpreting these interactions. Postcolonial theory offers a way of understanding how values are formed in response to historical marginalisation and cultural assertion. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism helps reveal the multi-voiced nature of their storytelling, where ethical meaning is not fixed but shaped through ongoing dialogue between contrasting views.

Postcolonial Theory: Reconfiguring Morality in a Colonial World

Postcolonial theory, as developed by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, provides a critical framework for examining how colonial rule affected cultural practices and moral thinking in formerly colonised societies. In the context of Naga communities, this approach helps us understand how missionary activity, Western education, and new systems of governance transformed existing ethical structures and introduced unfamiliar ways of thinking about right and wrong.

In Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, the characte Mose struggles to reconcile traditional Naga values with Christian teachings brought in during the colonial period. His moral conflict reflects what Homi Bhabha describes as "ethical hybridity," where a person tries to follow two different moral traditions at once. Vilie's loyalty to his community's customs often clashes with Christian ideas of forgiveness and humility, creating tension in how he understands his responsibilities.

Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* also addresses changes in ethical thinking, especially as people try to make sense of violence, loyalty, and honour in the wake of historical change. The stories show how older ways of life were challenged by new pressures, leaving many characters uncertain about what values to follow.

Postcolonial theory also draws attention to the idea of voice, asking who gets to speak, whose values are taken seriously, and how communities express themselves after having been overlooked or misrepresented during colonial rule. In both Kire's and Ao's writing, storytelling becomes a way of preserving cultural knowledge and raising important questions about justice, belonging, and moral responsibility.

Moral Voices of the Subaltern

In her widely studied essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?,* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether the colonised subject can convey her experience without having it overwritten by colonial frameworks of knowledge, language, and authority. Within this research, both Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are understood not merely as authors but as storytellers embedded in the cultural and historical realities of their communities. Their fiction reveals moral perspectives shaped by oral traditions, lived memory, and community experience. These perspectives have been systematically excluded from official histories and literary institutions shaped by colonial and patriarchal authority.

In *Mari*, Kire's protagonist makes a morally deliberate choice during the Japanese invasion, choosing to preserve life in ways that contest both patriarchal expectations and militarised ideals of honour. Kire constructs a narrative environment in which Indigenous ethical reasoning finds expression without being subordinated to external systems of moral judgments.

Ao's fiction draws out the moral perspectives of women and elders, voices often marginalised in both colonial histories and the narratives of the modern state. Her stories draw deeply from oral memory and communal experience, which carry ethical weight shaped through the details of ordinary life. These perspectives do not conform to inherited moral frameworks; they express forms of responsibility and care that arise from historically embedded relationships and shared memory.

Postcolonial Ethics and Communitarian Morality

In Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction, Leela Gandhi calls into question the moral frameworks associated with Western liberal thought, which emphasises individual choice as the foundation of ethical life. She turns attention to forms of morality that emerge through shared experience and mutual responsibility.

This approach to ethics comes through clearly in Ao's story "Apenyo," where an elder's choice to forgive her son signals not individual generosity but a deeper responsibility to restore social harmony. In this context, forgiveness becomes an act of renewal that addresses a breakdown in social relations and restores the connections that hold the community together.

A related ethical vision informs Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, where the protagonist's choices arise not from formal structures of power but from ancestral knowledge, spiritual experience, and enduring relationships with both people and place. In both narratives, moral understanding is passed on through memory, kinship, and shared responsibilities. Postcolonial theory contributes to an account of how specific historical and cultural conditions have shaped these forms of ethical life. Bakhtinian thought, in turn, draws attention to the way moral meaning is formed through dialogue, through speech, storytelling, and interaction within the community. These texts present morality not as something final or prescriptive, but as a process that unfolds through relationships, across generations, and within the demands of everyday life.

Bakhtinian Theory: Dialogism, Heteroglossia, and Moral Polyphony

Dialogism as Ethical Encounter

Bakhtin believed that ethical meaning comes not from a single, controlling voice, but through open dialogue between different, independent voices. In his view, ethics is not predetermined. It develops through conversation. We do not find meaning alone or receive it from authority. We discover it by speaking and listening to others as equals.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire presents a moral conflict between Dielieno and her grandmother where no single voice has the final say. Their opposing views challenge one another, showing that Naga morality is shaped by different cultural influences rather than straightforward rights and wrongs. Similarly, in *Laburnum for My Head,* Ao doesn't offer easy answers. She encourages the reader to think about death, nature, and women's lives in a way that leaves room for doubt, reflection, and multiple points of view.

Heteroglossia and Moral Stratification

Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia describes how different voices, ways of speaking, and worldviews can exist side by side within a single text. This combination doesn't just add variety but it opens up space for questioning dominant beliefs. Through this complexity, stories can challenge what's usually taken for granted.

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Kire brings together myth, Christianity, and ecological concerns to present a morally complex narrative where no single framework takes precedence. The interaction of different narrative modes reflects the tension between contrasting value systems. Similarly, Ao's use of Ao-Naga terms and Indigenous

idioms challenges the authority of colonial language and allows Indigenous ethical perspectives to be expressed within a multilingual narrative form.

Carnival and Subversive Morality

Bakhtin's notion of the carnival involves a subversive inversion of societal hierarchies wherein marginal voices gain prominence and dominant moral codes are mocked or challenged.

Ao's short stories subvert institutional moralities such as those of the state, church, and patriarchy through personal narratives of resilience. The use of irony and satire serves as a carnivalesque mode that questions official narratives and elevates alternative moral visions grounded in lived experience.

Moral Values as Cultural Praxis: Synthesis of Theory and Text

Postcolonial and Bakhtinian theories both stress that moral and ethical values in the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are not universal or absolute. They arise from cultural context, shaped by history and dialogue. Moral authority often rests with women, elders, and spiritual seekers who move through ethical terrains marked by trauma, resistance, and cultural memory.

Postcolonial theory brings attention to structural power, resistance, and the recovery of voices that have been historically suppressed. In contrast, Bakhtinian theory draws focus to dialogue, multiplicity, and the dynamic interplay of perspectives in shaping ethical meaning. Taken together, these frameworks deepen the analysis by showing that morality in these texts is not predetermined but emergent and dynamic.

By treating moral values as part of lived cultural experience, this study highlights the literary work of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao as vital to both Indigenous ethical thought and wider literary conversations. Their writing explores how ethical life is felt, questioned, and reshaped in communities often pushed to the edges of dominant narratives, and how literature becomes a space where the moral tensions of postcolonial life are explored and worked through.

1.7 Hypothesis

Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao present literary visions of ethics that are grounded in Naga cultural values, even as they subject those values to critical reflection and re-evaluation.

1. Their work goes beyond simply reflecting cultural norms, engaging with moral questions by affirming some values, questioning others, and drawing attention to the complexities of how people live and make sense of right and wrong.

2. Both authors portray ethical life as deeply connected to relationships, formed through community bonds, spiritual beliefs, and the lived realities of gender.

3. In their narratives, morality is not treated as an abstract idea but as something experienced in everyday life, shaped by daily choices, family responsibilities, community expectations, and personal spiritual seeking.

4. The idea of a good life in their work is closely tied to values like social harmony, care for the environment, respect for ancestral knowledge, and a sense of personal integrity. At the same time, they do not ignore the disruptions that arise when these traditional values come into conflict with historical trauma, formal education, urbanisation, militarisation, and ongoing gender inequality.

5. In many of their stories, characters are caught in moral situations where the values they have grown up with either offer no real help or add to their suffering. In response, the authors suggest other ways of living that are shaped by patience, kindness, and the need to find a better way forward.

6. Kire and Ao often show characters in situations where inherited moral values fail to offer guidance and at times deepen their suffering. Through these stories, the authors turn to quieter, more grounded ways of living shaped by care, integrity, and the effort to act justly.

7. Kire and Ao offer an ethical vision that draws from cultural memory while remaining open to change, allowing old values to be reconsidered in light of new experiences and shifting realities.

8. In the end, both writers hold on to what tradition offers but are not afraid to challenge it when needed. What is right or just, in their work, is never settled once and for all, but shaped by the pressures of daily life, past events, and personal experience.

1.8 Statement of the Problem

Although interest in the literature of Northeast India has grown in recent years, critical studies of writers like Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao still focus mainly on historical, political, and postcolonial concerns. Themes such as insurgency, identity, marginalisation, and memory are common in current discussions and have helped scholars understand the region's past. However, this focus often overlooks the moral and ethical questions that shape many of these texts. Kire and Ao write about responsibility, judgment, violence, and reconciliation. These are not side issues. They

are central to how the stories unfold. Ignoring them limits our understanding of what these works are asking about how people live, choose, and remember in the aftermath of conflict.

This study highlights the absence of analytical frameworks that place moral and ethical concerns at the heart of discussions on Naga literary texts. These texts reflect a deep concern with right and wrong, drawing on ancestral teachings, spiritual experience, and personal struggle. Yet scholars have seldom treated these concerns as central to the writers' intentions. Literature from Indigenous contexts often performs vital ethical functions, serving both as a keeper of communal values and as a medium for critical moral reflection.

The problem is made more acute by the marginalisation of indigenous ethical frameworks within the prevalent discourse of literary criticism. Interpretive approaches continue to draw mostly from Eurocentric traditions, including Kantian deontology, utilitarian reasoning, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. These traditions often fail to correspond with the ethical life of Naga communities, where morality is embedded in relationships, communal responsibilities, and spiritual significance. This study, therefore, aims not just to extend existing approaches but to reorient critical practice in ways that are more attentive to cultural context and ethical experience.

Thus the problem is not the absence of moral concerns in the texts but the lack of critical attention to them. This study highlights the ethical aspects of Kire and Ao's works and develops a way of reading that stays close to the values, relationships, and ways of life expressed in their writing.

1.9 Previous Research and Literature Review

The literature of Northeast India has gradually received more scholarly attention over the past few decades, with much of the focus on themes like identity, gender, nationalism, memory, and conflict. The writings of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, in particular, have played an important role in bringing out the lived realities and cultural stories of the Naga people. Although many studies have looked at different aspects of their work, the moral and ethical questions they raise have not received as much attention. This review looks at the existing research on Kire and Ao, noting where moral and ethical concerns have been touched upon, and pointing to the gaps this study intends to explore.

I. Primary Sources: The Literary Corpus of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao

Easterine Kire

1. ***A Naga Village Remembered (2003)***

Kire's debut returns to the battle of Khonoma, telling the story of the Naga people's strength under British military pressure. The narrative is shaped by ethical tensions such as resistance or surrender, loyalty to family or to the wider community, and the fragile line between remembered stories and written history. It speaks out against colonial violence and respects traditional codes of honour. At the same time, it quietly reveals the moral struggles faced by ordinary villagers, especially through the often unheard voices of women.

2. ***Mari (2010)***

Mari, drawn from the life of Kire's mother's cousin, looks back at the Second World War in Kohima through the eyes of those who lived its aftermath. The war remains

in the background, but the heart of the novel lies in how it shapes bonds between people. Mari's story unfolds quietly, through moments of courage, betrayal, pain, and kindness. Kire does not offer easy answers, but suggests that the strength to endure is found as much in private choices as in public history.

3. ***Bitter Wormwood (2011)***

Through This novel follows Mose, a former underground fighter in the Naga resistance. His memories and his grandson's point of view, Kire reflects on the moral cost of both insurgency and state violence. Violence is shown with complexity, not celebrated but not entirely rejected either. The story asks how a person tries to live rightly in a place shaped by long years of conflict and neglect.

4. ***When the River Sleeps (2014)***

This novel moves away from historical realism and turns to spiritual storytelling. Vilie walks through the Naga forest. He tries to make sense of loss and unanswered questions. The river he follows suggests peace and a truth beyond words. The story stays with quiet moments, time alone, and older ways of living. Vilie learns what matters through dreams and his bond with the land. His path reflects the beliefs and rhythms of the world he lives in.

5. ***Son of the Thundercloud (2016)***

This novel retells an Angami folktale about a miracle child, blending old stories with the experience of individuals in a changing world. It asks to hope, to believe in something larger, and to live with the burden of expectation. Kire tells the story through moments of personal loss and the bonds that hold a community together. Prophecy functions as a means to reflect on the present, especially the damage left by violence and the roles men are expected to play.

Temsula Ao

1. ***These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone (2006)***

This short story collection looks closely at the violence that has marked life in Nagaland, both at the hands of the state and of insurgent groups. The stories stay with ordinary individuals, particularly women, who live through loss, betrayal, and being driven from their homes. Ao doesn't try to separate good from bad in any clear way. She shows how people carry pain in different forms, and how that pain is shaped by what they've seen, lost, and survived.

2. ***Laburnum for My Head (2009)***

This collection draws from autobiography, folktales, and the experiences of women across different stages of life. The title story reflects on beauty and death. Other stories explore family bonds and the ways people make sense of faith and doubt. Ao focuses on care, respect, and connection as the foundation of her world. She places the rhythm of rural life alongside the disconnection that often comes with city living.

3. ***Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags (2010)***

Ao's memoir gives a deeper view of the world behind her fiction. She writes about being a woman, growing up on the margins, dealing with the impact of colonial education, and making everyday decisions that reflect complex values around family, work, and identity. Speaking as both a participant and observer, she brings clarity to the questions her stories often raise.

4. ***The Tombstone in My Garden (2022)***

This poetry collection reflects on loss, legacy, and the meaning of remembering. Ao draws on indigenous ways of knowing, writing with honesty and feeling. The poems read as both a cultural mourning and a reflection on what is remembered, what is

forgotten, and why it matters. Through poetry, she continues the moral concerns found in her other work.

II. Secondary Literature: Scholarly Works and Critical Contexts

1. **K.B. Veio Pou** – ***Literary Cultures of India's Northeast: Naga Writings in English (2015)***

Pou looks at how Kire and Ao write about identity politics and literary nationalism. This helps place Naga writers in the role of bridging cultures and perspectives. But it pays less attention to the ethical questions in their work, such as responsibility, suffering, and the choices people make in difficult situations.

2. **Charles Chasie** – ***The Naga Imbroglio: A Personal Perspective (1999)***

Pou looks at how Kire and Ao write about identity politics and literary nationalism. This helps place Naga writers in the role of bridging cultures and perspectives. But it pays less attention to the ethical questions in their work, such as responsibility, suffering, and the choices people make in difficult situations.

3. **NeivetsoVenuh** – ***British Colonization and the Reconstructing of Naga Polity (2004)***

It is a structured historical account that overlooks how colonial rule changed moral life, altered local practices, and weakened the values passed from one generation to the next. These are the very questions that literature brings into focus.

4. **Hargovind Joshi** – ***Nagaland: Past and Present (2001)***

This work offers useful information but remains largely descriptive and distant. It gives little attention to indigenous ways of thinking or to the moral questions tied to tradition, trauma, and survival.

5. **M. Alemchiba** – ***A Brief Historical Account of Nagaland (2008)***

Although rich in historical detail, the book lacks analysis of moral narratives or indigenous ethical practices, such as those explored through Kire and Ao's use of folklore.

6. **Uddipana Goswami – *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam and Nagaland (2014)***

Goswami explores reconciliation and ethnic violence but minimally engages literary texts. Yet her anthropological work opens pathways for linking field-based ethics with literary moral imagination.

7. **Sudeep Chakravarti – *The Eastern Gate (2022)***

A journalistic yet emotionally insightful narrative. Chakravarti highlights the everyday moral dilemmas that resonate with Kire's fiction but offers little theoretical scaffolding for literary analysis.

8. **Dolly Kikon – *Living with Oil and Coal (2019)***

Her framework of "everyday militarisation" offers valuable insight into ecological and ethical tensions in Ao's and Kire's writing. However, Kikon's work remains rooted in ethnography rather than literary ethics.

III. Theoretical Involvements

A. Theories of Literary Ethics and Moral Philosophy

The ethical thinking of Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth, Emmanuel Levinas, and Alasdair MacIntyre helps make sense of the narrative choices in Kire's and Ao's work, as well as the moral depth of their characters.

Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony is useful for reading how both writers bring in many moral voices, drawing readers into ethical questions that remain open and unresolved.

B. Postcolonial and Indigenous Ethics

Scholars such as Leela Gandhi, Gayatri Spivak, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Vine Deloria Jr. think closely about how indigenous cultures are represented. Their work speaks to survival, responsibility, and the ways tradition, belief, and place continue to guide how people live and relate to one another.

.C. Trauma, Memory, and Narrative Ethics

Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Michael Jackson help make sense of how *Bitter Wormwood* and *These Hills Called Home* deal with trauma through storytelling. Their ideas show how these works act as forms of mourning and survival.

D. Indigenous Worldviews and Cultural Memory

Daniel Heath Justice and Jeannette Armstrong write about storytelling as a way of living ethically with land, kin, and memory. Their thinking speaks closely to the concerns running through Kire's ecological writing.

E. Gender and Ethics in Postcolonial Contexts

Mohanty, Chakravarti, and Menon help us see how the women in Ao's and Kire's stories make moral choices while living with the challenges of both patriarchy and colonial rule.

F. North East Indian Literary Criticism

Tilottoma Misra, Suranjana Choudhury, and Ananya Sharma offer rare but significant analyses of Kire and Ao's ethical narrative forms, particularly highlighting moral memory and resistance.

1.10 Gaps in Existing Scholarship

There is a growing scholarly interest in literature from Northeast India; however, critical study of its ethical aspects remains limited. Much of the existing research focuses primarily on the sociopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts of Northeast Indian narratives. Themes such as identity, resistance, conflict, and marginalisation receive the most attention. Although these perspectives contribute valuable understanding, they often neglect the literary and philosophical frameworks that serve as the foundation for constructing moral values and ethical consciousness within the texts.

There is a clear lack of studies that carefully examine how storytelling techniques such as narrative form, voice, and memory engage with complex moral questions. The ways in which characters confront ideas like justice, duty, guilt, forgiveness, and responsibility to the community are rarely analysed through frameworks grounded in ethics or moral philosophy. As a result, the moral depth of these narratives is often overlooked, which can lead to a reduced understanding of their broader literary significance.

This gap matters in the classroom, too. In many universities, texts from this region are often taught through cultural or ethnographic angles. That approach, though useful, can limit how students connect with the deeper questions the stories raise. When there isn't space to reflect on how these works deal with moral problems rooted in everyday life, we lose sight of what they offer, not only in terms of regional insight but also in understanding broader human concerns.

By addressing this gap, the present study shifts the critical focus toward an ethics-based reading, emphasising how moral values are not only represented but also

examined, questioned, and developed within the narrative worlds of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao.

Although there has been important work on the political, historical, and gender aspects of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao's writing, direct engagement with the moral and ethical frameworks in their literature is still quite limited. Several critical questions remain underexplored:

1. What indigenous moral philosophies inform the characters' ethical choices?
2. How do these authors reconstruct ethical systems in the wake of trauma, colonisation, or spiritual erosion?
3. How is storytelling itself a moral act in Naga culture?
4. Can literature offer an ethical alternative to political violence?

1.11 Research Contribution

This dissertation seeks to engage with these questions, offering a literary-ethical inquiry rooted in both close textual analysis and cultural philosophy. By placing Kire's and Ao's texts in dialogue with historical, anthropological, and theoretical sources, this study aims to construct an interpretive framework that reveals how indigenous ethics, trauma narratives, and cultural memory coalesce into a rich moral universe.

These authors do more than recount historical suffering. Through their storytelling, they offer ways of understanding survival, memory, and identity as deeply ethical concerns.

1.12 Contributions of This Study

This study explores the presence of ethics in Naga literature through the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. It addresses a gap in current research by examining how these writers reflect moral ideas shaped by indigenous values, historical experiences, and present-day realities. Their writings show how traditions and memories of the past continue to influence choices, relationships, and ways of thinking. This approach offers a deeper understanding of Naga literature and places it within broader conversations about identity, moral understanding, and everyday life.

This research makes an important contribution by looking at ethics not just as a topic in Naga literature, but as something built into the way stories are told and understood. It examines how writers like Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao reflect moral ideas that grow out of community life, oral traditions, and knowledge passed down through generations. These ways of thinking are put in conversation with ideas from postcolonial, feminist, and environmental ethics. By bringing these perspectives together, the study offers a fuller way to read the texts and adds to wider conversations about literature and ethics.

This thesis also makes a direct contribution to Indigenous Studies in Northeast India by focusing on Naga ways of knowing and cultural understanding. Through close reading of the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, it shows how their writing helps keep cultural knowledge alive, responds to historical pain, and imagines paths toward healing and collective strength. The study connects literary analysis with Indigenous Studies, showing that literature is not only a space for storytelling, but also a place where values, histories, and ethical reflections take shape and are passed on.

This study also pushes back against the habit of reading literature from Northeast India only through national or postcolonial lenses. It treats Naga literature as a space where ethical thought develops from within its own cultural and social context. Indigenous storytelling is not placed at the edges, but brought to the center, where it speaks clearly about how people live, make choices, and relate to one another. The thesis questions the hold of Western literary traditions and opens the door to other ways of thinking, shaped by lived experience, place, and community ties.

Finally, this research provides a foundation for future interdisciplinary inquiry. Its engagemen twith ethics, culture, history, and literature opens new pathways for comparative Indigenous studies, reconciliation and conflict studies, and the ethics of representation in marginalised literatures.

1.13 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into six chapters, each contributing to the central objective of examining moral and ethical values in the selected works:

Chapter One: General Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the cultural and literary context of the Naga people, tracing their origins, migration routes, and the historical and social meanings attached to the term 'Naga'. It draws attention to the role of moral and ethical values within Naga society, values that are woven into collective life and expressed through stories, customs, and every day practices. The chapter outlines the aims and objectives of the study, focusing on the ways in which these values are echoed, questioned, or given new form in literary works. It also sets out the research problem, presents the hypothesis, and describes the methodological approach used in the

analysis. A brief review of existing literature is included to position the study within the wider field of inquiry. Themes such as identity, gender, conflict, memory, and indigenous moral thought are introduced to shape the direction of the discussion. The chapter closes by pointing to the study's contribution to the understanding of Naga literature, particularly in its attention to questions of ethics and the imaginative vision that informs it.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for understanding morality and ethics within the Naga cultural world, shaped by the everyday realities and social practices of the community. It explores how ethics and morality are expressed in Indigenous literary traditions, focusing on Naga storytelling. The chapter sees theory not as something separate from the texts, but as something that can grow from the stories themselves. Naga narratives often speak through relationships, to land, to memory, and to community. These connections shape how ethical ideas are formed and shared. The chapter brings in postcolonial theory, dialogism, feminist literary ethics, and trauma studies to support this reading. At the same time, it stays grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing that value care, reciprocity, and continuity. It asks how these stories might change how we read literature and how we think about ethics. In the end, the chapter offers a flexible framework that draws from different traditions while staying true to the experiences and voices within Naga literature.

Chapter Three: Tradition and Changing Syndrome of Values and Morality in the Select Works of Easterine Kire

This chapter looks at how tradition and changing moral values take shape in the fiction of Easterine Kire. It begins with *A Naga Village Remembered*, focusing on life in Khonoma and the values that held the village together. The discussion also considers the arrival of Christianity and the ways it disrupted established customs and ways of thinking. The chapter then turns to *Bitter Wormwood*, following Mose's personal struggles, and the threads of reconciliation and connection across generations. At the heart of both novels are characters caught in moments of moral uncertainty, and their choices offer insight into the wider changes unfolding within Naga society.

Chapter Four: Search for Identity and Values in the Select Works of Temsula Ao

Temsula Ao's fiction often explores how identity takes shape in moments of moral difficulty. This chapter turns to *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* and *Laburnum for My Head* to trace how her characters respond to conflict, personal longing, and choices that test their sense of right and wrong. The narratives acknowledge the presence of violence and political unrest, but the deeper focus rests on the quiet, internal struggles of individuals. Many of Ao's characters, particularly women, live through loss and trauma as they try to make sense of themselves within a world that is changing around them.

Chapter Five: Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao: Epitomes of Naga Tradition and Morality

This chapter turns to the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. Both writers speak from within the Naga world and take different paths through questions of tradition, identity, and moral experience. Their fiction draws from cultural memory and reflects on inherited ways of life. The past is present in their writing but does not limit it. Through their stories, they hold on to what has shaped their communities and face the tensions of the present. The comparison respects their differences and shows how each voice responds in its own way to a shared cultural history.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This chapter brings together the main findings of the study. It reflects on how the writings of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao help preserve cultural memory, question inherited values, and make room for change within Naga moral and social life. Their work speaks to both continuity and transformation. The chapter also points to directions future research might take, and closes with a reflection on the wider ethical and literary importance of their contributions.

This study examined the selected works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao. It focused on how their writing reflects the moral and ethical values of Naga society. The analysis also traced the tensions that emerge as these values shift in response to history, culture, and personal experience. The research showed that literature offers a way to express indigenous thought, preserve memory, and respond to questions of identity, gender, conflict, and tradition. By reading their work in both local and global contexts, the study recognised Naga literature as a keeper of cultural

knowledge and a space for ethical thought and change. These findings affirm the importance of indigenous writing in global conversations about morality, identity, and resilience.

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CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction: Situating Ethics and Morality in Indigenous Literary Discourse

The interconnected nature of morality, cultural memory, and identity in indigenous literary traditions calls for a critical method that is sensitive to both lived experience and theoretical complexity. Within the framework of Naga literature, particularly the narratives of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, moral understanding does not arise from universalistic norms but from a terrain marked by oral knowledge systems, spiritual continuity, colonial disruptions, and the ethical resonances of resistance. As Shikhu affirms, indigenous worldviews function not within rigid binaries of good and evil but through relational ethics rooted in kinship, reciprocity, and memory (Shikhu 45).

The legacy of British colonial rule and the processes of Christian missionary activities in the Naga Hills deeply unsettled the indigenous moral compass. The introduction of written scripture, Western education, and punitive legal systems diluted customary justice and replaced it with binary notions of sin and salvation. As Elwin suggests, this shift affected not only religious identity but also cultural self-perception (Elwin 78). Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* and Ao's *These Hills Called Home* are poignant articulations of such transitional phases. Their characters oscillate between inherited wisdom and alien value systems, often negotiating trauma, silence, and ambiguity rather than clear moral resolutions.

Postcolonial theory is essential for understanding how these texts participate in a wider discursive struggle. Edward Said's analysis of *Orientalism* demonstrates how colonial regimes use knowledge and representation to dominate (Said 23). In parallel, Bhabha's notion of the 'third space' as a site of hybrid identity creation applies aptly to the characters in Kire's novels, which are suspended between ancestral duty and new moral orders. In *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie's spiritual journey into the forest is both an act of solitude and an ethical confrontation with non-human agencies and ancestral legacies. This liminal space defies Western Cartesian ethics and gestures toward an animist framework where morality is embedded in ecology and memory.

Orality, often misunderstood as primitive by colonial anthropologists, is recast by Kire and Ao as an archive of ethical and historical truth. Ong notes that oral cultures privilege, memory, communal authority, and performativity over textual fixity (Ong 101). In the Naga tradition, the *morung* served not just as a dormitory for boys but as a moral training ground. The literature of Ao and Kire revives this oral ethos, inscribing it into written narratives without sacrificing its fluidity or communal resonance. Their stories do not simply recount events; they teach, warn, mourn, and heal. The act of narration itself becomes a moral practice, one that bridges the rupture between past and present.

Bakhtin's dialogism and heteroglossia provide powerful tools for understanding the polyphonic structure of these texts. In *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao employs multiple perspectives to depict the trauma of militarisation and insurgency. The insurgent, the child, the widow, the soldier, all possess voices that do not resolve into harmony but persist in tension. This multiplicity resists any singular moral judgement and embraces complexity, echoing Bakhtin's (1981) assertion that truth

emerges in the space between voices, not in monologic certainty. Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* likewise allows conflicting ethical positions to coexist: the revolutionary idealism of the young, the burdened silence of the elders, and the haunted regret of those who have witnessed too much.

The field of literary ethics, as outlined by Martha Nussbaum, prioritises the affective and moral capacities that literature fosters. Stories, Nussbaum argues, allow us to imagine the pain of others and develop moral reasoning grounded in empathy rather than abstraction (Nussbaum 31). Ao's story "The Night" challenges us to read Imnala's silence not as guilt but as resistance, a form of moral self-possession shaped by gendered vulnerability. Kire's character Mose in *Bitter Wormwood* similarly embodies a quiet morality forged through endurance rather than assertion. These characters are not archetypes but deeply situated persons whose ethical choices are conditioned by historical wounds and personal responsibility.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy deepens this notion of ethical engagement by suggesting that the face of the other imposes a moral demand prior to cognition or categorisation (Levinas 112). In reading Kire and Ao, the reader is confronted not with moral resolution but with the ethical necessity of witness, to stand with characters rather than over them. These are not texts that preach; they beckon. They ask for co-suffering, for listening without mastery. In this way, the act of reading itself becomes a relational and moral engagement, rather than an interpretive exercise in judgement.

Feminist ethics, particularly the works of Carol Gilligan and Alison Jaggar, further enrich our understanding of moral life in indigenous women's writing. Ao's women are not merely subjects of violence but moral agents. Khatila, in "The Jungle Major,"

responds to the violence around her not with aggression but with discernment and care. Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* explores how internalised patriarchy is both reproduced and resisted within familial relationships. The ethics of care here are inseparable from the politics of survival. Gayatri Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern woman who cannot speak unless through the voice of power becomes complicated in these texts, where silence itself can be a strategy of defiance, dignity, or mourning.

Memory, both historical and inherited, plays a constitutive role in these texts. Marianne Hirsch's (1997) concept of postmemory refers to the affective links that bind later generations to the traumas of their predecessors. *Bitter Wormwood* is structured around such memory transfer: the protagonist's identity is not built from scratch but assembled from the shards of past violence. Cathy Caruth contends that trauma resists full articulation but demands ethical attention in its repetition. These narratives do not offer closure; instead, they ask the reader to remain with the pain, to inhabit the unresolved, and in doing so, to acknowledge the humanity of those who live under its shadow (Caruth 154).

To read these texts, then, is to engage in what Paul Ricoeur describes as narrative hospitality: the willingness to receive stories that are not our own and to allow them to interrupt our ethical complacency (Ricoeur 202). In doing so, we enter an indigenous hermeneutics of ethics, one that honours silence, respects difference, and resist moral simplification. This hospitality is crucial in a world increasingly shaped by neoliberal individualism and historical amnesia. The hospitality extended by Ao and Kire is not sentimental but difficult, demanding of the reader an ethical vulnerability and openness to alterity.

Furthermore, these texts participate in what Leela Gandhi terms “the ethical turn” (Gandhi 139) in postcolonial studies, a turn that moves beyond resistance and subversion to consider forms of friendship, compassion, and mutuality. Ao’s depiction of intergenerational solidarity, and Kire’s portrayal of community mourning, suggests alternative ethical futures grounded not in revenge but in repair. In these narratives, forgiveness is not a passive act but a conscious choice, one that acknowledges historical wrongs while imagining the possibility of shared humanity.

From this vantage point, the role of storytelling emerges as a site of moral construction and communal healing. As Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1986) insists, the decolonisation of the mind must include a reclamation of narrative authority. Kire and Ao, through their textured prose and ethical complexity, challenge the narrative violence of colonial historiography. They restore the capacity of the indigenous subject to speak, remember, and judge. In doing so, they offer not nostalgia for lost traditions but a living ethics that evolves, resists, and endures.

Thus, this chapter presents a theoretical approach that is eclectic yet coherent, drawing from postcolonial theory, Bakhtinian dialogism, literary ethics, feminist frameworks, and memory studies. This methodology is not an imposition but a conversation, between text and theory, between author and reader, between indigenous history and contemporary moral crisis. By grounding literary interpretation in the lived moral experiences of the Naga people, this chapter offers a way to read that is as ethically alert as it is critically rigorous.

Kire and Ao do not merely narrate stories; they enact ethical worlds. Their works are deeply rooted in Naga epistemologies that value memory, reciprocity, and relationality. By reading their texts through a critical yet humane lens, one can begin

to appreciate how indigenous literature serves as both archive and intervention, a mode of remembering, questioning, and imagining the moral life. The aim of this theoretical framework, then, is not to fix meaning but to open it, so that the silences may speak, the marginal may assert, and the ethical may once again find its place in the literary imagination.

2.2 Postcolonialism and Indigenous Ethics

The encounter between postcolonial theory and indigenous ethics creates a fertile yet contested space within literary discourse. While both frameworks are concerned with interrogating power, voice, and identity, they emerge from distinct genealogies. Postcolonialism arises out of the critical interrogation of European imperialism and its cultural legacies (Said 23; Bhabha 56), whereas indigenous ethics are grounded in place-based epistemologies, spiritual cosmologies, and oral traditions. In the context of Naga literature, the fusion of these two fields allows for a more nuanced reading of morality that attends to historical violence without subsuming the particularities of indigenous worldviews under the universalising rubric of postcolonial critique.

In reading the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, one encounters an ethical terrain shaped by the scars of colonisation, the persistence of oral tradition, and the slow, difficult reclamation of indigenous agency. Their narratives do not merely 'represent' indigeneity within the postcolonial nation-state; rather, they re-constitute it through memory, resistance, and relational ethics. The postcolonial, in this sense, becomes not merely a temporal marker but an ethical provocation, a demand to reconfigure how history, identity, and morality are narrated and understood.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains a foundational text in postcolonial studies for its analysis of how the West constructed the East through a grammar of domination. This politics of representation, where the colonised is rendered voiceless, exoticised, or infantilized, finds resonances in how the Naga subject has been historically framed by both colonial and Indian national discourses. In *A Naga Village Remembered,* Kire resists such representational foreclosure by narrating history from within, privileging indigenous modes of remembering over colonial archives. The ethics of her narrative reside not in correcting the imperial record but in refusing to participate in its logic of othering.

The figure of the 'subaltern', as theorised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, offers a critical lens to examine the structural silencing of indigenous voices. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak within the dominant epistemic framework without being appropriated or erased. However, in Ao's stories, particularly "The Last Song" and "Laburnum for My Head," one witness's subaltern subjects speaking not through protest or proclamation but through embodied experience, ritualised mourning, and acts of everyday resistance. Their speech is not configured in linear logic or political vocabulary, but in silence, hesitation, and relational being. Here, indigenous ethics asserts itself not as opposition but as alternative.

The challenge, then, is not merely to locate indigenous voices within postcolonial discourse, but to interrogate how postcolonial theory itself can be decolonised; made more responsive to the epistemologies it seeks to understand. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith has powerfully argued, decolonising research involves recognising the authority of indigenous knowledge systems and reimagining ethical responsibility in

terms of reciprocity, stewardship, and relational accountability (Smith 55). In this regard, Kire and Ao do not simply contribute to postcolonial literature; they transform it by embedding it within indigenous ethical frameworks that prioritise memory, care, and spiritual continuity.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity further complicates the moral landscape of indigenous postcoloniality. Hybridity, as the site of cultural negotiation and resistance, is not a smooth amalgamation but a space of friction, uncertainty, and innovation. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist Vilie inhabits such a hybrid space that straddles animist cosmology, Christian morality, and modern survivalism. His ethical decisions are not dictated by any single framework but emerge through negotiation between ancestral wisdom and contemporary exigencies. Hybridity, here, is not a condition of loss but a site of ethical creativity.

This ethical hybridity is also reflected in Ao's characters, who often navigate between customary codes and modern dilemmas. In "The Boy Who Sold an Airfield," the young protagonist's action blurs the line between transgression and survival, mischief and moral ingenuity. Such moments resist the binary logic of postcolonial victimhood or resistance and instead offer a more textured understanding of moral agency under duress. As Leela Gandhi notes, postcolonial ethics must move beyond critique towards practices of care, hospitality, and non-violent cohabitation (Gandhi 139).

Indigenous ethics, in contrast to liberal models of morality premised on autonomy and rational deliberation, foregrounds relationality as its core principle. In many Naga communities, the moral self is not an isolated unit but a node in a web of obligations, to family, clan, ancestors, land, and spirit. This sense of situated

selfhood challenges the atomistic subject of Western philosophy and calls for a postcolonial ethics that is rooted in community and kinship. Kire's depiction of mourning rituals, and Ao's portrayal of women's collective resilience, offers powerful illustrations of this relational moral imagination.

Postcolonialism, particularly in its early formulations, was sometimes complicit in reinforcing the nation-state as the primary site of emancipation. However, for stateless or semi-autonomous communities like the Nagas, the postcolonial nation is often another agent of domination. As Chasie (2008) and Venuh (2004) have noted, the Indian state's response to Naga aspirations has oscillated between co-optation and militarisation. Literature, in this context, becomes a space not only for aesthetic expression but for moral witnessing. The ethical challenge for postcolonial critique, then, is to accommodate non-statist imaginations of justice and sovereignty, imaginations that are embedded in the land, memory, and spiritual vision of indigenous communities.

Temsula Ao's work exemplifies what might be called a testimonial ethics, a literature that bears witness without claiming authority that remembers without closure. In "Stone People from Lungterok," the stories are framed as fragments, recollections, and inherited memories. The narrators do not claim omniscience; instead, they gesture towards silences, ruptures, and the impossibility of full recovery. This refusal to narrate completely is itself an ethical stance, acknowledging the limits of language and the depth of suffering.

Similarly, Easterine Kire's works are replete with what Michael Rothberg (2009) terms "multidirectional memory," where the past is remembered not in isolation but through resonance with other traumas. In *Mari*, the story of a young girl during the

Japanese invasion of Kohima is told not only as personal tragedy but as a communal wound. The ethical power of the narrative lies in its refusal to isolate suffering or to use it as a currency for moral authority. Instead, it invites the reader into a shared space of vulnerability and care.

Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism" may be invoked here to understand how Kire and Ao navigate the politics of representation. While both authors resist simplistic notions of cultural purity, they also strategically invoke 'Naga-ness' as a mode of collective identity and ethical positioning. This is not a return to essentialism but a tactical assertion of indigeneity in the face of erasure. Their works articulate what might be termed a postcolonial indigeneity, a condition that is shaped by history but not overdetermined by it.

The ethics embedded in Kire's and Ao's works also challenge the temporality of postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism often privileges rupture, the moment of independence, revolution, or decolonisation. In contrast, indigenous ethics privilege continuity, cycles, and intergenerational transmission. The stories of both authors are replete with rituals, seasons, and ancestral presences that defy linear time. This temporal ethics foregrounds care over crisis, restoration over rebellion, and persistence over spectacle.

Environmental ethics also play a crucial role in this framework. The land is not a backdrop but a participant in moral life. In *When the River Sleeps*, the forest is alive with presence, both nurturing and dangerous. Vilie's relationship with the land is not one of conquest but of dialogue, prayer, and listening. This animist ethic destabilises the anthropocentric moral hierarchies of Enlightenment humanism and gestures toward an ecocentric vision of ethical being (Plumwood 81).

Finally, the language used in these texts is itself an ethical choice. Both authors write in English, a colonial language, but infuse it with local rhythms, idioms, and silences. This practice of "writing back" to empire (Ashcroft et al., 1989) becomes more than a literary gesture; it becomes an ethical act of survival, translation, and reclamation. It shows that postcolonial ethics must be multilingual, attentive to how voice is shaped not only by what is said but by how it is said, and in whose tongue.

Postcolonial theory offers indispensable tools for analysing power, history, and representation in indigenous literature. However, it must be recalibrated to engage with the specificity of indigenous ethics, an ethics rooted not in abstraction but in the lived, storied, and relational life-worlds of communities like the Nagas. The works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao invite a rethinking of postcolonialism from the ground up, from the soil, from the hearth, from the ancestral trail. In doing so, they articulate not just a literature of resistance but a literature of relation, resilience, and ethical renewal.

2.3 Dialogism and the Ethical Imagination in Naga Storytelling

In the context of Naga literature, where narrative is inseparable from memory, community, and moral instruction, Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia offer a powerful interpretative framework. Unlike monologic literature that seeks closure and singular truth; dialogic texts embrace multiplicity, of voices, perspectives, and ethical standpoints. This plurality is not a sign of incoherence but a profound mode of ethical engagement. In the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, the dialogic form becomes not merely an aesthetic choice but a cultural necessity, mirroring the lived complexities of Naga history and moral life.

Bakhtin posits that in the novelistic tradition, language is never neutral; it is always already situated in a network of social voices and ideological positions (Bakhtin 92). In the case of indigenous literature, this insight becomes especially salient. The Naga voice, historically suppressed or distorted in colonial archives, missionary documents, and statist historiography, find in literature a site for ethical and dialogic rearticulation. Both Kire and Ao resist the seduction of linearity, moral certainty, or omniscient narration. Instead, their works allow multiple consciousnesses to coexist, thereby producing a literary ethics grounded in recognition rather than resolution.

Temsula Ao's short story collection *These Hills Called Home* exemplifies the dialogic imagination in full force. Each narrative presents a different moral lens, whether it is the insurgent's rage, the widow's grief, or the soldier's disillusionment. Ao does not allow one voice to dominate or resolve the others; instead, the stories resonate with tension, ambiguity, and ethical friction. In "Soaba," for instance, the titular character's moral agency is continuously negotiated between his tribal obligations, political upheaval, and familial loss. The story's power lies in its refusal to render judgement. The reader, caught between competing ethical claims, must inhabit this moral dissonance, just as the characters do.

Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, the coexistence of distinct, autonomous voices within a single narrative, finds rich expression in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*. The novel traces the trajectory of Moses, a man shaped by his involvement in the Naga political movement and its devastating consequences. While Moses occupies the central narrative thread, the novel constantly shifts perspectives, to his family, his comrades, and later, to his son. These shifting viewpoints create a polyphonic tapestry of trauma, resistance, betrayal, and endurance. The result is not a coherent

moral message but a textured ethical landscape in which contradictions are honoured rather than suppressed.

Dialogism, in Bakhtin's vision, also entails the chronotope, the interconnectedness of time and space in narrative. In the context of Kire and Ao, the Naga village, forest, and family compound are not static settings but dynamic chronotopes where histories unfold, memories collide, and moral reckonings take place. In Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist Vilie's journey is framed through a series of spatial and temporal encounters, each charged with myth, danger, and ethical choice. The forest, in particular, becomes a dialogic space: it speaks, remembers, and challenges the protagonist at every turn. The ethical imagination in such a landscape is not about resolution but responsiveness, to ancestors, spirits, animals, and strangers.

One of the most potent aspects of Bakhtinian theory is its commitment to unfinalisability, the idea that characters, like real people, are never fully knowable or morally fixed. This is crucial in indigenous literature, where the burden of stereotype often reduces characters to either noble savages or tragic victims. Kire and Ao refuse such closure. Their characters grow, contradict themselves, falter, and persist. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire constructs the figure of the grandmother, Vime's grandmother, as both oppressor and tradition-bearer. Her actions are cruel, yet they are rooted in a worldview shaped by patriarchy, loss, and survival. This ethical complexity is sustained through narrative polyphony, allowing readers to dwell in discomfort rather than retreat into moral binaries.

The oral traditions of the Nagas themselves are deeply dialogic. Storytelling in indigenous communities is rarely a monologue; it is performative, participatory, and responsive. The teller adjusts to the audience, includes interjections, and weaves

communal wisdom into the fabric of narration. Kire and Ao, though writing in English and within the literary form of the novel and short story, succeed in retaining this dialogic impulse. Their prose often reads like transcription of communal memory, echoing the rhythms and cadences of oral speech. This narrative style aligns with Bakhtin's idea of the "internally persuasive discourse," which stands in contrast to authoritarian discourse (Bakhtin 92). Internally persuasive discourse invites engagement, disagreement, and reinterpretation, precisely what these authors achieve.

The ethical stakes of dialogism are immense. In literature that deals with violence, be it colonial, patriarchal, or militaristic, there is always the temptation to categorise victims and perpetrators in fixed roles. However, Kire and Ao destabilise these categories through voice. In *Mari*, the eponymous character is caught in the crossfire of the Second World War. Her experiences are narrated not in isolation but through intergenerational memory, her granddaughter becoming the medium through which the past continues to reverberate. The novel thus becomes a conversation between generations, languages, and moral positions. The enemy is not always the soldier; sometimes, it is memory itself, refusing to be quieted.

Temsula Ao's poetic work, too, reveals a keen sensitivity to dialogic ethics. Her poems often stage a conversation between self and land, woman and tradition, memory and forgetting. In "Blood of Others," Ao interrogates the collective responsibility for violence, using a chorus-like voice that shifts between accusation and introspection. Such poetic forms resonate with what Bakhtin termed the "carnival spirit," where fixed hierarchies are momentarily suspended and new ethical

possibilities are imagined. While Ao's poetry is deeply mournful, it is never static. The voices it mobilises demand not pity but ethical reckoning.

It is also important to note how dialogism functions not only between characters but between the text and the reader. Bakhtin asserts that meaning is always co-created; the reader is not a passive consumer but an active interlocutor. This is particularly evident in the moral structure of Kire's works. In *Walking the Roadless Road,* a semi-fictional account of the Christianisation of the Nagas, the reader must wrestle with the paradox of liberation through colonisation. The missionaries bring literacy, healthcare, and a new ethical order, but also alienation, fragmentation, and the death of indigenous cosmologies. Kire does not instruct the reader how to feel; she merely places the fragments before us, asking us to listen.

In the dialogic imagination, silence is as important as speech. Silence in these texts is not absence but presence, not apathy but resistance. In *The Last Song*, Ao's protagonist sings only when she is alone, her voice erased by societal judgement and gendered constraints. But her silence during public shaming is not passive; it is laden with meaning, saturated with refusal. Bakhtin did not write extensively on silence, but his emphasis on the surplus of meaning in discourse makes space for us to read silence as a form of counter-speech, a moment where the ethical demands of listening outweigh the need to speak.

Moreover, the dialogic imagination offers a means to critique the nation-state. In a region like Nagaland, whose political status has been a subject of prolonged conflict; state-sponsored narratives often present monologic versions of history. Literature, then, becomes a counter-discourse, one that refuses to align with nationalist teleologies. Kire's and Ao's texts do not offer a singular Naga identity but a chorus

of Naga voices, each shaped by time, place, gender, and history. This refusal of uniformity is itself an ethical stance, resisting the violence of assimilation.

The relevance of Bakhtin's theory to indigenous storytelling may seem surprising at first glance, given its roots in early twentieth-century Russian literary criticism. However, as scholars like Michael Holquist and Gary Saul Morson have shown, Bakhtin's emphasis on voice, context, and ethics renders his work especially valuable for interpreting non-Western texts. In the Naga context, dialogism allows for a reading practice that is hospitable to contradiction, open to indigenous epistemologies, and committed to ethical responsiveness.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge the risks of over-theorising indigenous literature through external frameworks. The dialogic imagination must not become a scholarly tool for aesthetic appreciation alone but a vehicle for ethical solidarity. To read Ao and Kire dialogically is to accept that one's interpretive authority is provisional, that the meaning of a story changes with every reading, and that our role as readers is not to master the text but to respond to it, with humility, attentiveness, and care.

The application of Bakhtinian dialogism to the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao reveals a literary ethics that is richly plural, deeply rooted in oral culture, and fiercely resistant to moral simplification. Dialogism allows us to hear the polyphonic voices of a people whose history has too often been narrated for them, not by them. It challenges us to remain in conversation, with the text, with history, with silence, and with each other. In a world increasingly fragmented by absolutism, the dialogic imagination offers a model of ethical engagement that is both radical and restorative.

2.4 Memory, Trauma, and Cultural Continuity in Naga Literature

Memory is not a passive recollection of the past but an active, often contested, process of cultural and personal identity formation. In indigenous literature, memory operates as a vital source of ethical orientation and resistance against historical erasure. For the Naga community, whose past is marked by colonisation, Christianisation, political insurgency, and state violence, memory assumes both individual and collective dimensions. Within this terrain, the literary works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao serve as crucial sites for the reclamation and reinvention of cultural memory and moral consciousness.

Trauma studies and memory theory provide a valuable lens through which to interpret these literary texts. Theories by Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Marianne Hirsch, and Michael Rothberg foreground the complexity of memory, particularly when it is shaped by violence and displacement. In Caruth's (1996) articulation, trauma is not a simple event that can be narrated and resolved; rather, it is an experience that resists assimilation and returns in belated, fragmented forms. This belatedness resonates powerfully in Kire's and Ao's writings, where trauma often unfolds in silence, intergenerational echoes, and dislocated subjectivities.

Easterine Kire's *Mari* encapsulates this framework. The novel, based on real events during the Japanese invasion of Kohima in 1944, captures war not through spectacle but through the intimate lens of a young girl's life. Mari's memories are mediated through her granddaughter, who records those decades later. The act of remembering here is not just personal, it is political. It becomes a refusal to let imperial and national histories overwrite indigenous experience. This structure of mediated memory aligns with Hirsch's (1997) concept of "postmemory," which refers to the

relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. In *Mari*, trauma is inherited but not passively; it is processed, reinterpreted, and finally narrated.

Temsula Ao's collection *These Hills Called Home* also engages with traumatic memory, though often in darker, more elliptical terms. In stories like "The Night," silence becomes the dominant language. Imnala, a woman subjected to unspeakable violence during counter-insurgency operations, refuses to narrate her suffering. Her trauma is communicated not through verbal articulation but through the rhythms of her body, the disintegration of domestic space, and the haunted atmosphere of her surroundings. LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma, noting that the former is repetitive and non-narrative, while the latter is narrativised and conscious. Ao's characters often oscillate between these two modes, demonstrating that working through trauma in indigenous contexts may not always take the form of Western therapeutic resolution. Sometimes, silence itself is a mode of working through.

Crucially, the memory that Kire and Ao construct is not only about trauma but also about resilience and continuity. The telling and retelling of stories become acts of moral affirmation. This is particularly evident in Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, where the memory of political struggle is inscribed in the protagonist's life. Mose, the central figure, does not seek heroism but survival. His recollections of the Naga nationalist movement are marked by ambivalence, hope, loss, pride, guilt. This complexity reflects what Rothberg (2009) describes as "multidirectional memory", the idea that memories of different traumas do not compete but interact and inform one another.

In Kire's narrative, colonial trauma, insurgency, and familial grief co-exist, offering a layered ethical topography.

What distinguishes indigenous memory from other forms of cultural memory is its rootedness in land and oral tradition. For the Nagas, memory is not only textual but spatial. Hills, rivers, and forests are not inert backdrops but living repositories of ancestral presence. In *When the River Sleeps*, Kire crafts a protagonist whose journey is guided by dreams, signs, and the whispers of the natural world. The river, in this context, is not merely symbolic but mnemonic, a medium through which memory flows and returns. This resonates with Pierre Nora's (1989) idea of *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, but expands it beyond monuments and museums to include living landscapes and spiritual geographies.

Ao's poetic oeuvre also embodies this form of mnemonic continuity. Her poem "Stone People from Lungterok" recalls the Ao myth of origin, rooting the people's memory in the metaphysical. The poem is not nostalgic but assertive, countering the erasures of modernity with a re-inscription of indigenous presence. The 'stone people' are not relics of past but enduring markers of identity. Through such mythopoetic engagement, Ao constructs what Paul Ricoeur terms "narrative identity" (Ricoeur 202), a self constituted through the stories one tells about oneself and one's community. In indigenous literature, narrative identity is a form of ethical positioning: to remember is to take responsibility for the past, to assert dignity in the present, and to shape the moral contours of the future.

The politics of memory in Naga literature is also entangled with the politics of forgetting. Official histories, whether colonial, nationalist, or missionary, often omit the intimate sufferings and ethical dilemmas of indigenous peoples. Literature

becomes a counter-archive, preserving what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "silences in history" (Trouillot 131). In *Walking the Roadless Road*, Kire excavates the story of Christianity's arrival in Nagaland, challenging the triumphalist narrative of religious conversion. The book foregrounds the spiritual conflict experienced by the first converts, who had to navigate between ancestral loyalties and a new moral order. These internal struggles, rarely captured in missionary accounts, are crucial to understanding the ethical metamorphosis of Naga society.

Such acts of literary remembrance are not simply exercises in documentation; they are performative. As Judith Butler asserts, memory is an ethical act because it implicates the subject in the lives and deaths of others (Butler 89).

Ao's and Kire's narratives do not offer the reader safe distance. Instead, they draw one into the wound, demanding empathy, humility, and a willingness to dwell in the unresolved. The stories compel readers to acknowledge that indigenous memory is not just a record of suffering but a site of ethical instruction, where the past is kept alive not for vengeance but for wisdom.

This ethical dimension of memory is often gendered. Women in Naga literature frequently emerge as custodians of memory, bearing the weight of trauma while also sustaining communal continuity. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire explores how matrilineal power can become both oppressive and redemptive. The grandmother figure, though severe, preserves stories, customs, and rituals that anchor the protagonist's moral growth. Similarly, Ao's female characters remember not as passive victims but as active narrators, whose memories carry both pain and agency. This aligns with the feminist theorisation of memory as a form of resistance,

particularly in cultures where women's voices are routinely marginalised (Mohanty 115; Cvetkovich 37).

The use of English in these texts adds another layer of complexity. English is both the language of the coloniser and the medium of modern indigenous expression. Kire and Ao inhabit this paradox with grace, infusing English with local idioms, proverbs, and cadences. This linguistic hybridity itself is a form of memory work, a re-membering of voice in a foreign tongue. It recalls what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes as the "language of memory," a language that is not simply a tool of communication but a vessel of moral and cultural inheritance. In this sense, the very act of writing becomes a mnemonic ritual, a way of preserving what is in danger of being lost.

The tension between memory and forgetting, between trauma and resilience, also underlines the temporality of indigenous ethics. Western models of trauma recovery often assume a linear progression from rupture to healing. However, in the Naga context, as represented in these literary works, memory operates in cycles, returning, recurring, reconfiguring. This cyclical temporality is embodied in rituals, festivals, and oral retellings, where the past is never sealed off but continually reintegrated into the present. Such a worldview aligns with what Walter Benjamin calls "messianic time" (Benjamin 40), a time that is non-linear, interruptive, and ethically charged.

Moreover, cultural continuity in Naga literature is not nostalgic but dynamic. Kire and Ao do not idealise tradition; they interrogate it. In doing so, they construct what Stuart Hall calls a "positioned identity", that is not fixed but historically situated and ethically engaged (Hall 69). Their protagonists often question inherited norms, seek new meanings, and forge alternative moral paths. This critical continuity affirms that

memory is not a chain but a thread, capable of weaving new patterns without severing ancestral ties.

The literature of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao presents memory not as a static repository but as a living, ethical force. Through narrative, they reclaim silenced histories, confront inherited traumas, and affirm cultural continuities. The theoretical frameworks of trauma studies, memory theory, and indigenous epistemology converge in their works to offer a rich terrain of moral enquiry. To read their texts is to enter into a covenant of remembrance, to recognise that every story told is an act of survival; every memory preserved a gesture of moral renewal.

2.5 Feminist Literary Ethics and Gender in Indigenous Contexts

Feminist literary ethics, particularly when applied to indigenous contexts, foregrounds the intersectionality of gender, cultural identity, and moral agency. Unlike abstract moral philosophies that often universalise ethical norms, feminist ethics is rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised subjects and the relational dynamics of care, vulnerability, and resistance (Gilligan 1982; Held 2006). When applied to Naga literature, especially the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, feminist ethics provides a powerful framework for understanding how moral subjectivity is constructed in the crucible of gendered experience, social expectation, and historical trauma.

In much of feminist theorising, ethics begins not with the sovereign, autonomous individual of Enlightenment tradition, but with the relational self, a subject embedded in familial, communal, and ecological networks. Carol Gilligan's pioneering work *In a Different Voice* (1982) challenged the patriarchal bias of

conventional moral reasoning, proposing that women's moral development often centres on responsibility and care rather than abstract justice. This orientation finds resonance in the narratives of Kire and Ao, where women are often portrayed not as victims of moral circumstances but as agents of ethical negotiation, whose actions are shaped by memory, reciprocity, and endurance.

Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* is perhaps the most potent literary exploration of this ethical terrain. The novel centres on Dielieno, a young girl growing up under the authoritarian care of her grandmother, Vibano. At first glance, Vibano appears as a matriarchal tyrant, reproducing patriarchal norms through the policing of female behaviour. However, as the narrative unfolds, Vibano's actions are revealed to be shaped by her own trauma, loss, and the burdens of tradition. Here, feminist ethics does not simply indict her cruelty but seeks to understand its origins. As Sara Ruddick (1989) argues in *Maternal Thinking*, the ethical dimensions of care must be analysed within their socio-political constraints. Vibano's care is distorted by fear, generational memory, and an inherited system of moral regulation.

Dielieno, on the other hand, becomes a site of ethical reimagination. Her resistance to Vibano's expectations is not rebellious in a liberal, individualistic sense but emerges through a gradual redefinition of familial bonds, educational aspirations, and emotional resilience. She embodies what feminist philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1992) terms the "concrete other", a moral subject whose needs, voices, and perspectives must be considered in their specificity. The novel does not resolve the tensions between tradition and freedom but lets them persist in dialogue, showing how ethical maturity involves learning to navigate and question inherited norms.

Temsula Ao's stories are similarly attentive to the gendered dimensions of moral life. In "The Last Song," the female protagonist is a school teacher abducted by insurgents, subjected to humiliation and silencing. Her trauma is not sensationalised; it is marked by an absence of speech, a withdrawal into solitude. However, Ao reclaims her voice through the symbolic act of singing, alone, in her own time, away from the judgement of others. This act of quiet assertion speaks volumes about the ethics of survival. Feminist scholars like Judith Butler (2004) and Adriana Cavarero (2000) have highlighted how vulnerability and voice are not mutually exclusive; rather, the expression of trauma can itself become a moral testimony.

In Ao's *These Hills Called Home*, many of the female characters are burdened by violence, communal, domestic, and structural, but they are not reducible to it. Instead, they embody what bell hooks (1984) describes as "the margin as a site of radical possibility." In their mourning rituals, community work, and acts of refusal, they articulate an ethics of care that resists patriarchal and colonial impositions. This moral agency is deeply embedded in indigenous epistemologies, where women often play central roles as mediators of cultural memory, oral tradition, and spiritual continuity.

A striking feature of Kire's and Ao's feminist ethics is their refusal to romanticise either womanhood or indigenous culture. They are unflinching in their portrayal of how gendered hierarchies operate within tribal communities. In *Bitter Wormwood*, for instance, Kire presents female characters who suffer under both nationalist politics and domestic control. Yet, their moral strength lies not in transcending these contexts but in surviving them with dignity and complexity. This aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) critique of Western feminism's tendency to

homogenise Third World women. Instead, what we find in Naga literature is decolonial feminist ethics that arises from within the cultural matrix of the community and resists external impositions.

Language plays a crucial role in shaping this ethical world. Both Ao and Kire write in English, a colonial language, but they infuse it with the rhythms, idioms, and cadences of their mother tongues. This linguistic hybridity becomes a feminist strategy, a way of asserting voice in a language historically used to silence them. As Spivak (1993) notes, the act of "speaking in and against" colonial language is itself an ethical performance. In these texts, English becomes not a neutral medium but a terrain of negotiation, where gendered experience is rendered legible without being assimilated.

Furthermore, feminist ethics in Naga literature is deeply entangled with the ethics of memory. Women remember differently, not because of biological determinism but because they occupy different positions in the social fabric. In *Mari*, the grandmother's act of narrating her war-time memories to her granddaughter is an act of moral transmission. It is not just a recounting of events but a bequeathing of values: compassion, endurance, discernment. The gendered nature of this memory work reflects what Marianne Hirsch (2008) calls "affiliative memory", a form of remembrance that forges connection across generations and experiences. This memory is not linear or monumental but cyclical, intimate, and profoundly ethical.

In many of these texts, the domestic space becomes a crucible of moral complexity. Contrary to liberal readings that may dismiss the home as a site of confinement, Ao and Kire reveal how the domestic can also be a space of resistance, creativity, and healing. In *Don't Run, My Love*, Kire explores how a woman's intuitive knowledge

of her son's inner conflict prevents a cycle of violence. Her moral authority is not grounded in law or doctrine but in a finely tuned relational awareness. Nel Noddings' (1984) theory of the "ethic of care" is pertinent here, where moral reasoning is rooted in attentive listening and empathetic responsiveness. The woman in Kire's story does not act out of abstract principle but out of a deep understanding of her son's soul, knowledge accumulated through years of quiet observation, sacrifice, and love.

This ethic of care also extends to the natural world, forming an ecofeminist strand in their work. In *When the River Sleeps*, the forest is not merely a setting but a moral interlocutor. The protagonist's relationship with the landscape is shaped by listening, respect, and non-instrumental engagement. Feminist scholars like Val Plumwood (2002) and Vandana Shiva (1989) have argued that patriarchal systems often mirror their domination of women in their treatment of nature. In contrast, indigenous feminist ethics sees the land as a relative, not a resource. Women in Kire's and Ao's works often articulate this wisdom, blending spiritual knowledge with ecological care.

Significantly, feminist ethics in Naga literature does not operate in isolation; it is embedded in a collective moral consciousness. Women's stories are told not as exceptional but as integral to the community's moral fabric. This challenges the androcentric assumptions of both mainstream ethics and nationalist historiography, which often privilege male heroism and public action. By focusing on women's everyday moral choices, caring for a child, burying the dead, refusing violence, Kire and Ao reorient the ethical gaze toward the ordinary, the relational, and the enduring.

Moreover, the feminist ethics expressed in these texts also critique modernity and its discontents. In stories where women migrate to towns, engage with education, or

marry outside the community, they confront new forms of alienation and ethical fragmentation. The tension between tradition and modern aspiration is not resolved but explored. These women do not simply assimilate into modernity; they reinterpret it. This ethical reconfiguration reflects what Uma Narayan (1997) calls "dislocatory feminism," where the task is not to reject tradition wholesale but to engage with it critically, reworking it from within.

In this sense, feminist literary ethics in the works of Kire and Ao is both restorative and radical. It restores silenced voices, unacknowledged labours, and forgotten moralities. At the same time, it radically reimagines the contours of ethical life, not as abstract rules but as situated, embodied, and intersubjective practices. The moral questions posed in these texts, what it means to care, to resist, remembering, are not answered through universal doctrines but through story, silence, song, and survival.

To conclude, feminist literary ethics provides a vital theoretical and moral framework for engaging with the gendered complexities of Naga literature. In the writings of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, we encounter women not as passive subjects of history but as active moral agents whose stories unsettle, inspire, and illuminate. Their voices, crafted with care and courage, constitute a feminist ethics that is indigenous, relational, and deeply attuned to the moral textures of everyday life.

2.6 Literary Ethics and the Question of Representation

The question of representation lies at the heart of literary ethics, especially in contexts where history, identity, and power intersect in complex ways. In the case of indigenous literature, such as that produced by Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, the act of representation is never neutral; it is always implicated in broader struggles

over voice, visibility, and moral agency. The ethics of representing others, especially the subaltern, the silenced, the traumatised, requires both theoretical reflection and aesthetic sensitivity. This section draws upon literary ethical theories, postcolonial critique, and indigenous knowledge systems to critically examine how Kire and Ao navigate the ethical demands of storytelling.

At its core, literary ethics is concerned with the responsibilities borne by writers and readers in engaging with narrative. Martha Nussbaum argues that literature cultivates moral imagination by allowing readers to inhabit lives different from their own (Nussbaum 31). However, the ethical potential of literature is not realised automatically; it depends on how representation is enacted. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" challenges the assumption that simply giving voice is sufficient. She warns against the re-inscription of dominance through benevolent representation. In this light, Kire and Ao's texts are exemplary in their efforts to render the indigenous experience not as spectacle, but as subjectivity, rich, conflicted, and agentive.

One of the ethical challenges in representing indigenous life is the tension between cultural specificity and literary universality. Kire's novels, such as *Mari* and *Bitter Wormwood*, are grounded in historical and geographic particularity. Yet they resist the tendency to exoticise Naga identity. Rather than staging cultural difference for an external gaze, she presents lived realities from within. In *Mari*, the eponymous character's experience of war is not reduced to nationalist discourse or victimhood; instead, it is rendered through the quiet rhythms of domestic life, familial loss, and emotional survival. The ethical force of the narrative lies in its refusal to

monumentalise suffering, it shows trauma not as an event but as an enduring, intimate disruption.

Temsula Ao's stories likewise challenge reductive modes of representing tribal communities. In *These Hills Called Home*, the characters are morally ambivalent, their actions shaped by fear, loyalty, grief, and hope. By refusing to romanticise or demonise, Ao adheres to what Wayne Booth (1988) calls an "ethics of narrative sincerity." Her narrative voice neither exploits nor absolves; it listens. This act of narrative listening, allowing characters to exist in their contradictions, is itself a form of ethical representation. It resists the closure of judgement and invites readers into the space of moral uncertainty.

Representation, especially of violence and trauma, poses specific ethical dilemmas. How can literature bear witness to pain without sensationalising it? How can the aesthetic form honour the integrity of lived experience? Elaine Scarry (1985) contends that physical pain resists language, making its representation always partial and vulnerable to appropriation. Kire and Ao navigate this risk through restraint, indirection, and an ethics of implication. In *The Last Song*, for instance, the protagonist's trauma is not narrated in graphic detail but evoked through ellipsis, metaphor, and silence. This narrative strategy respects the opacity of suffering, it acknowledges that some experiences defy articulation and that ethical writing sometimes means knowing when not to speak.

Moreover, both writers challenge the binary of the speaking subject and the silent object. Their texts feature a multiplicity of voices, women, elders, insurgents, villagers, and spirits, each carrying its own moral resonance. This polyphony resonates with Bakhtin's (1981) theory of heteroglossia, where language is

understood as a field of competing perspectives. In *When the River Sleeps*, the protagonist Vilie's journey is accompanied not by a single truth but by layered meanings, signs, and moral tests. The landscape itself seems to speak, echoing indigenous epistemologies where voice is not limited to human subjects. Representation here becomes relational, not extractive. The storyteller is not a sovereign narrator but a participant in a web of moral and cosmological relationships. The ethics of representation also demands attention to form. How a story is told is as important as what is told. Ao and Kire adopt forms that resist linearity, closure, and didacticism. Their narratives are episodic, elliptical, often ending on notes of ambiguity. This refusal of resolution is an ethical gesture; it respects the complexity of the world represented and the autonomy of the reader. As J. M. Coetzee argues in *The Lives of Animals*, literature must not prescribe moral lessons but create spaces where moral reflection becomes possible (Coetzee 27). The open-endedness of Ao's and Kire's narratives invites readers to reflect, question, and re-imagine, rather than to consume or judge.

Another vital dimension of literary ethics in indigenous writing is the question of cultural translation. Writing in English, a colonial language, imposes its own burdens. It is both a medium of reach and a site of rupture. Kire and Ao are acutely aware of this dilemma. They infuse their English prose with tribal idioms, oral cadence, and untranslated words. This creates a hybrid textual space where indigenous voice is not assimilated but asserted. The act of partial opacity, leaving some terms unexplained, is itself an ethical choice. It signals that indigenous knowledge is not entirely translatable, nor should it be made entirely legible to external frameworks.

In this sense, their work aligns with what Walter Benjamin (1923) described as the "task of the translator", not to erase difference but to preserve it, even if it means estrangement. Ethical representation, particularly in postcolonial contexts, often involves resisting the temptation of total clarity. It means allowing the reader to remain outside, to approach with humility, rather than assume mastery. Ao's poetic language often performs this distancing. Her imagery, rich in mythic and natural references, refuses reductive interpretation. It honours the world it evokes by maintaining its irreducible depth.

Importantly, representation in these texts is not limited to individuals but extends to community and environment. Kire's *Walking the Roadless Road* captures the collective journey of the Naga people through the lens of religious conversion. It shows how belief, identity, and morality are reshaped across generations. The narrative does not offer a singular viewpoint; rather, it maps a terrain of conflicting voices, traditionalists, converts, sceptics. The ethics of this representation lies in its multiplicity: the text refuses to assign blame or confer moral superiority. It presents the community in flux, morally evolving, and invites the reader to engage with the messiness of transformation.

Temsula Ao's poems, too, are acts of communal representation. They do not simply voice personal experience but speak with and for a people. In "Songs That Tell," she invokes the moral burden of the storyteller, to remember, to resist forgetting, and to carry forward the voices of those who cannot speak. This ethical responsibility is not abstract; it is embodied in the poetic form, in the choice of words, rhythms, and silences. The poet becomes a custodian of memory, a translator of grief, and a mediator of ethical reflection.

One must also consider the ethical implications of representing gender within indigenous contexts. Ao and Kire are keenly attentive to the gendered dynamics of power, care, and voice. Their texts often centre on women's experiences, not as exceptional but as integral to communal life. The ethics of this representation lies not in tokenism but in depth. Their female characters are not symbols or metaphors; they are flesh-and-blood figures negotiating survival, love, violence, and faith. In representing them with nuance, the authors disrupt both patriarchal and exoticising gazes. They offer a feminist ethics of representation, rooted in context, accountable to lived realities, and committed to complexity.

Furthermore, the question of who gets to represent whom is central to literary ethics. Both Ao and Kire are insiders to the culture they depict, yet they write for both local and global audiences. This dual positionality complicates the ethics of representation. As indigenous intellectuals writing in English, they occupy what Spivak might call a "double bind." Yet, they turn this bind into a creative and ethical opportunity. Their texts educate without explaining, represent without reducing, and speak from within without becoming spokespersons. This delicate balance is perhaps the highest form of ethical representation; it honours the subjectivity of the represented while acknowledging the mediating role of the author.

Finally, the ethics of reading must also be considered. As readers, especially those from outside the Naga context, we must approach these texts not as windows into an exotic world but as invitations to ethical relationship. This requires what Rita Felski calls "recognition", not in the sense of identification, but in the sense of acknowledging the alterity of the text and the demands it places upon us (Felski 150). Literary ethics is not just about how authors represent but about how readers

respond. Ao and Kire do not offer comfort; they offer challenge. Their stories are not meant to be consumed but to be carried, pondered, and responded to with care.

To conclude, literary ethics in the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived practice. Through form, language, and narrative choices, they enact a representation that is accountable, responsive, and deeply respectful. They show that storytelling is not just a mode of expression but a moral vocation that seeks not to speak for others, but to create spaces where voices can speak, be heard, and be honoured in all their complexity.

2.7 Towards a Syncretic Framework: Integrating Theories with Indigenous Ethics

The analytical journey across the preceding sections of this chapter has traversed a diverse yet interconnected terrain of theoretical perspectives, from postcolonial critique and dialogic imagination to memory studies, feminist ethics, and literary representation. In the context of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao's oeuvre, the challenge lies not merely in applying these theories in isolation but in integrating them into a nuanced framework that does justice to the layered moral, cultural, and narrative textures of indigenous literature. This final section proposes such a syncretic model that is attentive to the specificities of Naga experience while remaining conversant with global intellectual traditions.

At its core, this framework must begin with the recognition that indigenous literature is not merely a field of cultural representation but a space of ethical performance. In Kire's and Ao's writing, storytelling is not a passive act of remembering or artistic expression; it is an active mode of moral reasoning, community engagement, and

historical recovery. This aligns with the understanding of literature as a form of ethical inquiry, as proposed by scholars like Martha Nussbaum, who asserts that narrative art enables readers to imagine and evaluate complex moral lives (Nussbaum 32). However, unlike Western literary traditions that often foreground individual autonomy, indigenous ethics, as expressed through these writers, privileges relationality, reciprocity, and continuity.

Thus, the syncretic framework must foreground relational ethics, drawing from both indigenous knowledge systems and feminist theories. Carol Gilligan's (1982) ethic of care, reinterpreted in indigenous contexts, highlights the importance of social ties, responsibilities, and interdependence. In Kire's *Don't Run, My Love*, for instance, the protagonist's maternal instincts are guided not by moral absolutism but by an embodied understanding of care and fear. Ao's women, too, make moral decisions that resist codified norms and instead arise from situated awareness. Such instances suggest that ethical meaning is not abstracted from life but embedded in its very texture.

Equally central to this framework is the dialogic imagination, derived from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony. In Naga literature, multiple voices, human and non-human, ancestral and contemporary, official and marginal, co-exist, contradict, and converse. Kire's *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies this dialogic ethos. Vilie's journey is accompanied by inner dialogues, signs from the natural world, and metaphysical tests, demonstrating a world animated by voices beyond the rational and empirical. Representation, therefore, is not monologic but polyphonic, demanding an ethics that is equally dialogic. It is this multiplicity of consciousness that must inform any analytical framework.

Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Spivak, Bhabha, and Said, brings to this framework a critical interrogation of power, history, and voice. Kire and Ao do not write from a position of cultural nostalgia or nationalist recuperation; they write from the margins of multiple empires, colonial, missionary, nationalist. Their engagement with memory and voice must therefore be understood as resistance to the dominant epistemes that seek to silence, assimilate, or exoticise. Yet, they do not adopt rhetoric of victimhood. Instead, their narratives craft new forms of agency, what Homi Bhabha calls the "third space" (Bhabha 56), where hybrid identities negotiate tradition and modernity, loss and renewal.

Importantly, the framework must also embrace trauma and memory studies. Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominick LaCapra (2001), and Marianne Hirsch (1997) provide tools for understanding how traumatic pasts are remembered, repressed, or transmitted. In *Mari* and *Bitter Wormwood*, memory is not linear or cathartic; it is cyclical, inherited, and often ambivalent. Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is especially useful in understanding how later generations bear the ethical weight of histories they did not directly experience. In this sense, narrative becomes a site of intergenerational ethics, a way of bearing witness to what Rothberg (2009) calls "multidirectional memory," where different histories of trauma intersect rather than compete.

To hold these disparate strands together, the proposed framework must be indigenised, that is, grounded in the epistemic and cultural realities of the Naga people. This requires moving beyond the mere application of Western theories to a dialogical engagement with indigenous worldviews. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith have long argued for the decolonisation of research methodologies and the

incorporation of indigenous ontologies (Smith 55). In the Naga context, moral authority often resides in oral narratives, ancestral land, ritual practice, and communal wisdom. The very structure of Kire's and Ao's narratives, non-linear, mythic, and deeply ecological, reflects this worldview. The framework must therefore treat these narrative forms not as stylistic quirks but as epistemological gestures.

Language is a crucial site of this negotiation. As has been discussed, both authors write in English yet infuse it with tribal rhythms, untranslated idioms, and oral cadences. This strategic use of language performs an ethics of cultural retention within a global medium. The framework must be sensitive to this linguistic hybridity, understanding it not as deficiency but as ethical defiance. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argues, the choice of language in postcolonial literature is never innocent; it reflects one's political and moral positioning. Kire and Ao use English not to erase but to encode indigenous voice, demanding an analytical approach that is attuned to such subtle negotiations.

Another dimension of the syncretic framework is its attention to gender and feminist ethics. While both authors centre women's experiences, they do so without falling into idealisation or victimisation. Their female characters are morally complex, navigating violence, patriarchy, and care with resilience and ambiguity. This challenges both patriarchal structures within indigenous communities and the tendency of Western feminism to homogenise Third World women (Mohanty 115). The framework must therefore incorporate intersectionality, recognising how gender intersects with ethnicity, location, history, and power. It must also embrace the ethics

of vulnerability (Butler 89), treating pain not as spectacle but as the ground for moral engagement.

The ethical dimension of this literature is also shaped by its ecological consciousness. The natural world is not merely setting but interlocutor. Rivers, hills, forests, and spirits are not metaphors but agents within a moral ecology. This demands an eco-ethical lens that acknowledges indigenous environmental epistemologies. Val Plumwood (2002) and Vandana Shiva (1989) have critiqued the patriarchal logic of domination over nature, advocating for relational and reciprocal models of human-nature interaction. In texts like *When the River Sleeps*, ethical maturity is measured not by conquest but by attunement to the rhythms of the non-human. The framework must thus include eco-indigenous ethics that foreground respect, restraint, and relational knowing.

Finally, the syncretic model must allow for reader-response ethics. Literary ethics is not confined to the text; it extends to the act of reading. As Rita Felski notes, literature prompts not just interpretation but recognition, an effective response that alters the reader's ethical stance (Felski 150). The stories told by Kire and Ao are not simply to be analysed but to be received with humility, empathy, and a willingness to dwell in their moral ambivalence. The framework must therefore be reflexive, acknowledging the positionality of the critic, the limitations of theoretical grids, and the irreducibility of lived experience.

In synthesis, the syncretic framework proposed here integrates seven interdependent dimensions:

1. **Relational Ethics**: Rooted in care, interdependence, and indigenous moral orientations.

2. **Dialogic and Polyphonic Narratives**: Emphasising voice multiplicity and moral complexity.
3. **Postcolonial Critique**: Addressing power, hybridity, and resistance to hegemonic narratives.
4. **Memory and Trauma Studies**: Highlighting the ethical responsibility of remembering and witnessing.
5. **Feminist and Intersectional Ethics**: Centring gendered moral subjectivities within cultural and historical context.
6. **Eco-Indigenous Worldview**: Acknowledging the moral agency of the non-human and the ethics of ecological stewardship.
7. **Reader-Response and Reflexivity**: Encouraging ethical participation, recognition, and responsibility from readers and scholars alike.

This integrated approach allows for a reading of Kire's and Ao's works that is critically rigorous, ethically responsive, and culturally situated. It resists both the reduction of theory to abstraction and the romanticisation of indigeneity. Instead, it insists on complexity, dialogue, and moral accountability. Such a framework is not fixed or final; it is iterative and open-ended, evolving with the texts it seeks to interpret and the ethical challenges they pose.

Approaching Naga literature through a syncretic framework means more than applying theories, it means listening, dwelling, and responding. It means allowing the texts to reshape our critical tools, to teach us new grammars of morality, and to remind us that literature, at its most powerful, is not just a mirror but a meeting ground, where ethics, aesthetics, and existence converge.

2.8 Conclusion

In tracing the theoretical pathways that illuminate moral and ethical values in the writings of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao, one finds oneself continuously drawn into the heart of storytelling as both an aesthetic and ethical act. The study of indigenous literature, particularly that which emerges from the complex cultural and historical landscapes of Nagaland, necessitates not merely a methodological application of theories but a dialogue, a careful and sustained listening to voices shaped by memory, struggle, and survival. The moral imagination of Kire and Ao is not constructed in isolation but flows from a long lineage of oral traditions, ancestral wisdom, ecological belonging, and gendered experience. This chapter has offered a multidimensional framework to engage with such literature, and what emerges most strongly from this exploration is the necessity of reading not from above, but from beside.

The moral universe of indigenous literature is profoundly relational. It resists abstraction and categorisation, refusing to present moral truths in the manner of philosophical treatises or theological doctrines. Instead, it speaks through the rhythm of everyday life, the decisions of a mother in the face of war, the silence of a village elder burdened by history, the ecological intuition of a hunter who walks with reverence through a dreaming forest. The ethics presented in these narratives are not universal in the Enlightenment sense, but situated, nuanced, and often fraught. They are embedded in relationships, with land, with family, with memory, and with the sacred. What becomes clear is that to interpret such texts through an exclusively Western paradigm would be to miss their pulse; what is needed is an interpretive

openness that allows theory to bend, evolve, and respond to indigenous ways of knowing.

The authors under study do not simply craft fiction; they participate in cultural memory-work. Their texts are repositories of loss, hope, and negotiation. The trauma of colonial incursion, the violence of militarisation, the disruptions of missionary intervention, and the anxieties of modernisation all ripple through their stories, not as overt commentary, but as textures of lived life. These are narratives in which history does not reside in dates and treaties but in the hesitations of speech, in the scars on a hillside, in the remembered songs of a grandmother. Reading such literature ethically requires more than hermeneutic skill; it demands moral patience and a readiness to be changed by what one reads.

What becomes increasingly evident is that voice, who speaks, who is allowed to speak, and how one listens, is central to both the aesthetic and ethical fabric of these texts. Kire and Ao do not universalise the Naga experience; they particularise it with care, attending to dialect, gesture, silence, and contradiction. Their narrative worlds are not constructed from omniscient vantage points but are revealed through fragments, whispers, overlapping voices, and lingering silences. This polyphonic structure resonates with a dialogic ethic that values not the assertion of a singular truth, but the acknowledgment of moral plurality. The characters are rarely exemplary in a didactic sense; they are flawed, conflicted, and deeply human. Their moral choices are not tidy resolutions but open questions, inviting readers to reflect rather than judge.

The act of writing itself, especially in a colonially inherited language like English, becomes a charged ethical site. The choice to write in English is not merely a

practical decision but a political and moral one. For writers like Kire and Ao, English is both a vehicle of visibility and a reminder of historical dispossession. Yet, they do not capitulate to its imperial baggage. Instead, they inflect the language with Naga idioms, tribal cadence, oral rhythm, and a deep ecological sensibility. This hybrid language becomes a space of resistance, preservation, and re-creation. It reminds us that linguistic purity is a myth of empire, and that the ethical work of language often lies in its capacity to bear contradiction, carry memory, and speak beyond itself.

Their engagement with memory is especially powerful. The past is never treated as a closed chapter; it breathes through the present, shaping the choices, relationships, and silences of contemporary characters. Trauma in these narratives does not conform to therapeutic models of catharsis or healing. It lingers, sometimes unresolved, sometimes transmitted across generations in the form of cautionary tales, taboos, or inherited grief. Such memory-work resists narrative closure and instead insists on ethical endurance. It asks readers not to move on but to stay with the wound, to recognise the dignity of endurance, and to honour the histories that cannot be rewritten.

Gender in these narratives is not an ancillary theme but a moral axis. Women are often positioned at the heart of ethical life, not as saints or martyrs, but as moral agents navigating patriarchal structures, militarised violence, and domestic expectations. Their choices are not framed in binary terms but are marked by compromise, intuition, and survival. These female voices resist both romanticisation and erasure. They teach us that ethical strength is not always dramatic or public; sometimes, it lies in the quiet insistence on remembering, on nurturing, on refusing to forget. The feminist ethic that emerges from these texts is not abstract or imported;

it is local, intimate, and embedded in lived practice. It values relational care over heroic autonomy and emotional wisdom over philosophical abstraction.

At the same time, the natural world in these narratives is not merely a backdrop but a moral actor. Hills, rivers, forests, and animals are not passive scenery; they are animate presences, participants in the ethical lives of the characters. This eco-indigenous sensibility defies the anthropocentric assumptions of much Western ethical theory. It teaches that morality is not a human monopoly but a collective negotiation between beings, visible and invisible. To walk through a forest in Kire's fiction is to enter a sacred conversation, to be tested not only by one's choices but by the attentiveness of one's footsteps. This ecological ethics demands humility, reciprocity, and a recognition of interdependence, values that have become increasingly urgent in a world marked by climate crisis and ecological devastation.

It is also important to acknowledge that these texts do not offer a singular ethical vision. They contain contradictions, ambivalences, and tensions. This is not a weakness but strength. It reflects the reality that moral life is rarely coherent or consistent. The task of ethical literary criticism, then, is not to resolve these tensions but to engage with them honestly and attentively. It is to recognise that literature, at its best, does not tell us what to think but teaches us how to listen, how to dwell in uncertainty, and how to ask better questions.

What has emerged through this exploration is a syncretic framework that does not subordinate theory to text or text to theory. Instead, it fosters a mutual conversation, wherein theoretical insights sharpen our reading of indigenous texts, and those texts, in turn, challenge, expand, and sometimes overturn the assumptions of those theories. This is particularly important in postcolonial studies, where there is often a risk of

reiterating colonial logics through the very act of interpretation. The voices of Kire and Ao resist this by speaking in registers that are at once deeply local and profoundly universal, not because they conform to a global grammar of ethics, but because they compel us to reimagine what ethics it might mean.

The ultimate lesson of this theoretical engagement is that moral and ethical values in literature cannot be extracted like data; they must be lived through the reading process. They must be felt in the cadence of a sentence, the silence of a broken dialogue, the fragility of a remembered name. To read Kire and Ao is to enter a world where every story is a moral event, every memory a responsibility, and every voice a claim to ethical attention. This is not merely literary appreciation; it is ethical participation.

As the thesis moves into its subsequent chapters, examining individual texts, characters, themes, and historical contexts, the insights developed here will serve as a compass. Not a rigid map, but a compass: something that orients without dictating, that points towards ethical North without flattening the terrain. The strength of Kire and Ao's literature lies in its ability to guide without instructing, to suggest without prescribing, and to invite without demanding.

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CHAPTER THREE

TRADITION AND CHANGING SYNDROME OF VALUES AND MORALITY IN THE SELECT WORKS OF EASTERINE KIRE

3.1 A Naga Village Remembered: Tradition and Communal Values in Khonoma Village

Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* is more than a fictional retelling of Khonoma's past. It is a heartfelt tribute to Naga tradition and identity. By telling the story of a village known for its resilience and communal strength, Kire brings back a moral and cultural world shaped by colonial and postcolonial pressures. Her narrative does more than record events. It becomes a way of preserving oral traditions, rituals, and values that are often left out of official histories. Through fiction, Kire protects and reflects on a living heritage that is at risk of being forgotten. The novel offers a setting where traditional Naga beliefs and moral codes are remembered and explored. Readers are drawn into a world where identity, memory, and resistance are rooted in culture and community.

Central to Kire's portrayal is a deep sense of collective life, where the story draws its strength and meaning from the community rather than the individual.Khonoma is depicted as a society where social bonds are defined by kinship, shared rituals, and customary laws. The community lives in close connection with oral traditions, festivals, folktales, and ancestral wisdom that act as moral compasses. These traditions highlight a deeply interdependent ethos, governed by mutual respect, honour, and the reinforcement of social responsibilities. This is especially evident in

the way the younger men show reverence to the elders: “But if the elders were there, the younger men listened closely without speaking much. They learned the stories of the village” (Iralu 6). The silence and attentiveness of the young men reflect a culture where wisdom is passed down with care and respect, emphasizing communal learning and intergenerational bonds. Likewise, the role of women such as Kovi’s sister exemplifies social responsibility within the domestic sphere: “She had been a good woman, not one to join the village gossips but keeping herself to her hearth and caring for her husband and children” (Iralu 8-9). Her quiet dedication to family and home upholds the communal values of honour and duty, illustrating how individuals contributed to the stability and moral fibre of village life.

The morung, or bachelor’s dormitory, is perhaps the most salient feature of this traditional pedagogy. It functions as an institution where young boys are educated in the values and responsibilities of their community. Here, morality is not imposed through didactic teaching but is inculcated through participation, observation, and oral instruction. As Kire suggests, the village itself becomes a crucible for ethical becoming, where values are lived, performed, and shared communally (Kire 84).

What Kire achieves in *A Naga Village Remembered* can be described as a kind of ethical archaeology. She brings forward the indigenous knowledge and traditional values that shaped Naga life before the arrival of colonial rule. This is particularly visible in her treatment of headhunting, a practice often dismissed as barbaric by colonial and modern standards. Kire reframes it as a culturally symbolic act, rooted in notions of bravery, manhood, and clan loyalty. Such values may appear problematic to contemporary moral sensibilities, they were integral to communal identity and survival. For instance, when Kovi proudly remarks, “My son has a

warrior's heart," as the boy imitates his father's graceful warrior steps with a spear (Iralu 61), we see how martial traditions were passed down not only through training but through deep emotional and cultural investment. Similarly, when it's said that "the men of Khonoma have gone on several raids and brought back enemy heads by hundreds" (Iralu 61), Kire is documenting more than violence. She is preserving a narrative of identity, courage, and historical memory.

In contrast, colonial accounts often reduced headhunting to savage bloodlust, stripping it of its cultural and ritual significance. British administrators and missionaries recorded such practices primarily to justify military intervention and moral superiority, effectively silencing the meaning it held within the Naga community. By centering indigenous perspectives like Kovi's, Kire responds to this loss of history and restores complexity and dignity to practice long misrepresented.

The novel also documents the historical resistance of Khonoma against British colonial forces. Known for its strategic location and fierce warriors, Khonoma became a symbol of defiance in the Naga Hills. As Visier Iralu notes, "Khonoma was well defended by the formidable entrance to the village and sheer rock face that made it a natural fortress" (Iralu 1). Its influence extended beyond the Northern Angami region to encompass other Angami territories and Naga villages under its protection. Khonoma's warriors, drawn from clans such as Semo, Thevo, and Merhu, maintained a population of under a thousand, yet they repeatedly resisted colonial forces and threatened nearby British-controlled regions, including Assam.

Between 1832 and 1880, the British launched multiple expeditions against Khonoma in an effort to subdue the village and secure a safer route between Assam and Manipur. Captain E.L. Wood's first attack in 1844 resulted in the burning of the

village (Iralu xi–xiii). A second offensive followed in 1849 after British intelligence suggested that Khonoma had allied with anti-government factions in Mezoma. The third expedition in December 1850, led by Captain J. Butler and others, succeeded in capturing Khonoma and again set it ablaze.

Despite British military superiority, the Naga warriors of Khonoma employed ingenious defense tactics. As Kire describes, "The British had their canons but the men of Khonoma were protected by the natural world they had always lived so close to. Crude nets of cane held rocks and when they cut the cane, a volley of rocks fell upon the ascending soldiers, killing and wounding and deterring any further attacks" (Iralu 84).

A major turning point occurred in 1879 when Deputy Commissioner G.H. Damant ignored warnings and visited Khonoma, hoping to negotiate peace. "I have had enough reports of the audacity of Khonoma," Damant remarked. "I will negotiate again but if they do not toe the line there's no other solution but an expedition against the village" (Iralu 67). His assassination by Khonoma warriors ignited one of the fiercest battles in the history of the Naga Hills. The British launched a final offensive, culminating in a prolonged siege.

The novel records, "The fighting was bloody and so fierce that the day's battle was considered the fiercest battle of the Naga Hills. It brought out the worst and the best in men" (Iralu 83). Mhiezizokho Zinyii writes in Phizo and the Naga Problem: "The last battle was fought on Saturday the 22 November 1879 in Khonoma. We were not defeated but the war was brought to an end" (Zinyii 213). A peace treaty was verbally agreed upon on March 27, 1880, and, as Zinyii adds, "We scrupulously kept our word" (213).

Through *A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire not only narrates the political history of resistance but also reflects the transition in moral values, from the indigenous code of honour and kinship to a modernity shaped by colonial intervention. The traditional ways of justice, passing down from knowledge, and keeping the community united are shown as deeply rooted and strong, yet also at risk of being worn down by outside force.

This novel shows how storytelling can hold on to a way of life that's slowly fading. By portraying Khonoma not just as a place but as a community shaped by strong values and beliefs, Kire reflects on how tradition forms a deep part of identity. She also explores how colonialism disrupted these moral foundations, yet how the sense of community still holds meaning in the present. In this way, the chapter explores how Kire's work thoughtfully engages with the changes happening in Naga society, offering a powerful reflection on tradition, memory, and the quiet forms of resistance that keep culture alive.

3.2 Winds of Change: Examining the Impact of Christianity on Naga Village Life in A Naga Village Remembered

In *A Naga Village Remembered*, Easterine Kire draws on both historical record and creative storytelling to explore the changing moral and cultural landscape of the Naga people. This part of the novel marks a moment of transition, as Christianity begins to enter and influence a community deeply rooted in its warrior traditions. Khonoma, once governed by a collective ethic rooted in ancestral values, finds itself confronting a new moral order brought by colonial missionaries.

By focusing on the mid to late 19th century, Kire situates this transformation within a context of profound cultural tension. The arrival of British colonialism brought not only political conflict but also spiritual upheaval. As Kire illustrates, this was a time when "the men of Khonoma had gone on several raids and brought back enemy heads by the hundreds" (Iralu 61), and headhunting was a source of honour and communal pride. Pou affirms this, stating that the pursuit of glory through headhunting was "a prominent and highly esteemed path to fame and title acquisition" (Pou 76). These values, deeply embedded in Naga tradition, soon came into question under the scrutiny of Christian moral teachings.

Kire paints a vivid picture of Khonoma's pre-Christian world, rich with cultural vitality. She blends oral traditions, daily life, and social rituals into the narrative, offering a portrayal of a society deeply connected to its customs. The novel's initial chapters span three generations, from Kovi to his nephew Levi, and to Levi's sons, Roko and Sato, capturing both the strength and vulnerability of a community at the edge of transformation. The author stresses the patriarchal structure and communal discipline of the village: "Each man knew his duty and where his obligations lay" (Iralu 3).

The cultural equilibrium is gradually disrupted with the arrival of Dr. Sidney Rivenburg, a Christian missionary whose approach combines spiritual teaching with medical care and education. His efforts are met with both skepticism and admiration. Establishing a mission school and offering medical treatment, Dr. Rivenburg, affectionately called Chaha Ketsau (Old Sahib), is instrumental in introducing Western systems of morality and healing. His dual mission of salvation and welfare reflects a more complex and less coercive form of colonial influence.

This new moral vision begins to reshape the lives of individuals like Sato, who, after being admitted to the mission school and progressing in his education, chooses to embrace “Isu” (Jesus) at the age of 19. Sato’s transformation is not just his own, it reflects a broader change taking place within his community. As he begins to let go of his fear of the white man, he also starts to drift away from the traditions that once shaped his sense of self. In their place, a new faith and way of seeing the world slowly take root, mirroring the quiet questioning and shifting beliefs of a younger generation finding its way through uncertain times.

Kire does not depict Christianity as entirely harmful. She shows that it introduces literacy, healthcare, and new ways of understanding faith. But its arrival also brings a deep shift in ethical thinking. The Christian code, built on sin, redemption, and judgment, begins to replace the older Naga way of thinking. In the past, ethics came from within the community, shaped by lived experience and shared understanding. Now, they are filtered through outside beliefs, often split into strict ideas of good and evil.

As Christianity spreads through the village, tensions begin to surface. The spiritual guilt brought by the new faith challenges deeply rooted ways of life, creating a growing distance between generations. Many younger members of the community turn to the new religion in search of purpose and certainty. Their elders continue to uphold the beliefs and customs grounded in tradition. This divide reflects more than a shift in faith; it signals a deeper change in the moral foundations and sense of identity within the community.

Missionaries are sometimes viewed as kind and generous, but they also bring with them a sense of moral superiority. They dismiss practices like headhunting, animist

rituals, and traditional music. This rejection removes aspects of the culture that have shaped the community for generations. Their presence changes the way values are understood, placing foreign religious beliefs above local traditions and introducing new ideas of spiritual worth.

In *A Naga Village Remembered*, the "winds of change" are not just historical events but they signal deeper moral shifts. Kire's portrayal of Khonoma's religious and ethical transformation reflects a wider pattern of changing values in Naga society. This chapter highlights how the meeting point of colonial influence, new faith, and questions of identity alters not only what people believe but also how the community holds itself together.

3.3 Moral Dilemmas: Clashes of Values, Ethical Challenges, and Choices Faced by Naga Village Residents

In *A Naga Village Remembered*, moral struggles are never faced alone. They pass through families and echo through the village. One person's decision can bring confusion, sorrow, or doubt to many. Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao write about a time when everything familiar began to change. With the arrival of colonial forces and new religion, the old way of life began to slip. People stood between two ways of living, unsure which path to take. These moments were heavy. They tested how much someone could hold on to, and what had to be let go. In the everyday practices of domestic and communal life, in spaces such as the home, the field, and the forest, the impact of individual choices becomes visible. These narratives reveal how memory and loss coexist, reflecting a community's effort to maintain its cultural foundations amid shifting social and political forces.

Through careful attention to her characters, Kire shows that moral choices don't happen in isolation. They are shaped by ties to clan, by spiritual beliefs, and by a deep sense of duty to the community. These forces often pull in different directions. What looks like a simple decision is often a struggle to balance values that matter deeply. The people in her story are not just choosing between right and wrong. They are trying to stay true to themselves and to each other in a time when everything around them is changing.

The arrival of Christianity in traditional Naga society brings more than a change in belief; it creates a deep and lasting tension within the community. The new religion doesn't simply offer a different way to worship; it challenges the very heart of village life, including its rituals, values, and sense of kinship. Villagers find themselves having to make difficult choices. Should they continue with the customs passed down through generations, which hold their community together, or turn toward a faith that reorders their moral and social world? For many, this isn't just a matter of belief. It comes with a personal cost, feelings of guilt, fear of being cut off from others, and uncertainty about where they now belong. These private struggles are made even harder by how the wider community responds. "The villagers were so angry with the new converts and "there was great hostility in the village community against the small band" (Iralu 103). Conversion doesn't just create new believers; it risks breaking old ties and stirs up resentment within the village itself.

The impact of this shift is seen clearly in the experience of the village warriors. In the traditional Naga setting, they were admired as defenders of the community, with head-hunting closely tied to their identity and status. The introduction of Christian values challenges this role in fundamental ways. Teachings that promote humility,

forgiveness, and restraint ask the warriors to give up practices that once defined honour and duty. The command to "turn the other cheek" is not a simple instruction. It asks them to abandon a worldview where strength, loyalty, and protection were expressed through action and, at times, violence. For many, this is not just a change in behaviour but a deep personal conflict. It forces them to question what it means to belong, to lead, and to live with dignity in a society that is being reshaped around them.

Sato's Conflict: Between Initiation and Inner Transformation

Among the most compelling illustrations of moral complexity is the character of Sato. On the verge of his initiation into adulthood, Sato wrestles with dread and spiritual yearning. Though he proceeds with the ritual to honor familial expectations and cultural norms, his post-initiation reflections signal a deeper, internal transformation. Rather than experiencing regret, Sato feels a serene sense of clarity:

"All he could feel was its incredible sweetness… the assurance that what he had done was not a mistake at all." (Iralu 99)

This emotional resolution reflects what Mikhail Bakhtin calls dialogism: the emergence of moral truth through interaction among conflicting worldviews. Sato's experience is not framed as a binary choice between old and new but as a reconciliation of the two. He reinterprets the Christian narrative of Jesus (Isu) through the lens of indigenous sacrificial rites:

"Isu was the chicken being sacrificed for man to be free from disease and all the ailments the spirits could bring upon him." (Iralu 101)

Sato's reinterpretation exemplifies what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space", a generative zone where hybrid identities are formed not through cultural substitution but through overlap, tension, and creative translation. The resulting meaning is not a compromise but a synthesis, deeply rooted in both worlds and yet exceeding the limits of either. Here, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony is also at play: Sato's voice emerges in relation to other voices; each grounded in its own worldview, yet none able to claim absolute authority. This multiplicity does not resolve into a single truth but invites an ongoing dialogue. Sato's spiritual identity does not arrive at a clear or final shape. It develops through conversation, across different places, and in the habits of everyday life where questions of belief continue to surface. He does not try to bring everything into agreement or reach one conclusion. Instead, he allows differences to exist together without forcing them into order. This is not a search for certainty. It is a way of paying close attention to what matters, even when it does not fit neatly. In this, Sato offers a quiet form of understanding built on relationship and trust.

Levi and the Moral Weight of Tradition

In sharp contrast, Sato's father, Levi, experiences deep emotional pain as he faces his son's change in spiritual direction. For Levi, Christianity is more than a new belief; it threatens the moral foundation of their ancestral heritage and challenges his role as guardian of tradition. His feelings of loss and betrayal reveal the profound divide between generations when faith and identity shift.

Despite Sato's efforts to bridge the two belief systems, asserting that "there is no quarrel between the old religion and the new religion" (Iralu 101), Levi remains

unconvinced. His disapproval is not rooted in theological disagreement alone but in the fear of cultural erasure. This internal conflict is echoed in Kovi, another elder who admires Christian virtues but feels compelled by social position to maintain the status quo:

"He saw there was a lot of good in it. But he did not feel it was appropriate for a man like him, an elder and a titled member of the village, to embrace the new religion… and he was greatly saddened." (Iralu 105)

These moments reflect an Indigenous ethical framework grounded in relationality, ancestral reverence, and collective harmony. Elders like Levi and Kovi are not simply moral agents; they are embodiments of communal memory, ritual continuity, and spiritual anchorage.

Peno and the Familial Ethics of Relationality

Caught between her sons Sato and Roko, Peno exemplifies the emotional costs of moral transformation within the family. Though she acknowledges the goodness in Sato's Christian path, her loyalty remains with her husband and the traditions he represents:

"Sato, your ways are different, you are a warrior of a different kind… I can only say that it is not possible for me, my son. I cannot betray your father." (Iralu 114)

Peno's moral stance reflects an ethic of relational commitment, typical of many Indigenous cosmologies. Her decisions are not measured in terms of abstract principles but by the preservation of familial bonds and social coherence. Her voice adds a gendered dimension to the ethical discourse, highlighting how women mediate cultural continuity amidst generational fracture.

The ethical tension in Kire's narrative is not confined to private interiors; it plays out on the landscape of the village itself. Converts to Christianity are expelled to the outskirts, spatially and symbolically marginalised. This practice of ostracism functions as a form of moral policing, reinforcing traditional authority through exclusion. Yet moments of rupture occur.

When Krusietso breaks a genna taboo but suffers no divine punishment, the presumed causal link between ritual violation and spiritual retribution is disrupted:

"Everyone knew the breaking of the taboo would be punished by the violator being bitten by a snake. Miraculously, nothing happened to Krusietso." (Iralu 103)

This scene resonates with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, where established hierarchies are temporarily inverted, revealing the contingency of sacred systems. Though the traditional moral order is not completely dismantled, its symbolic power begins to wane, making room for alternative understandings of truth and consequence.

Cultural Fragmentation and Ethical Displacement

The broader implications of these ethical struggles are captured in the works of Temsula Ao, who observes the psychological dislocation experienced by Nagas amid cultural transition:

"Being a Naga became an apologetic acknowledgement of a seemingly inferior individual." (Ao 4)

Conversion was not merely a spiritual act; it marked entry into a new moral economy shaped by Western education, colonial power, and Christian doctrine. The ethical divide became a site of cultural alienation, as the traditional value systems were de-legitimised in the face of imported ideologies. As Alemchiba notes, missionaries

were often met with suspicion as they attempted to replace ancestral wisdom with scriptural authority (Alemchiba 158).

The result was a fragmented society, split between "constructive Nagas" who sought to preserve indigenous traditions, and converts who were accused of betrayal. As Shikhu explains, this created a fundamental bisection in social identity and communal belonging (Shikhu 79).

Moral Pluralism in a Time of Transition

Kire's narrative resists the temptation of moral absolutism. Instead, it presents a complex moral landscape where characters negotiate competing values shaped by culture, faith, family, and historical change. The ethical journeys of Sato, Levi, Peno, Kovi, and others are not framed as right-versus-wrong decisions, but as existential navigations through ambiguity, loss, and hope.

By integrating Bakhtinian dialogism, Rokeach's value theory, Indigenous relational ethics, and Bhabha's hybridity, we see that moral dilemmas in the Naga village are expressions of a broader civilisational negotiation. These are stories of individuals and communities learning to live within contradiction, where the sacred past and the uncertain future are held in fragile, sometimes painful, coexistence.

3.4 Shifting Paradigm: Evolving Social Norms and the Changing Syndrome of Values and Morality through the Lens of *A Naga Village Remembered*

Moral and ethical values form the backbone of any society, offering a framework for communal harmony, empathy, and respect. In *A Naga Village Remembered,* Easterine Kire portrays a society in transition, Khonoma, a traditional Naga village,

undergoing a profound transformation in its moral and cultural landscape. Through this nuanced narrative, Kire captures a "changing syndrome" of morality, reflecting shifts from collective to individual ethics, oral to textual traditions, and indigenous spirituality to Christian doctrine. This chapter examines these shifts through relevant sociological and ethical theories, demonstrating how moral frameworks evolve in response to socio-cultural, religious, and generational forces.

Moral Order in Traditional Naga Society

The traditional Naga moral structure is deeply embedded in communal institutions such as the morung (male dormitory) and the thehou, or the Angami house, which served as centers for intergenerational learning and value transmission. These were not merely spaces of shelter but crucibles of cultural education where young men were taught communal responsibility, storytelling, oral histories, and performative traditions.

As Easterine Kire writes, "The boys had so many stories to swap so they never slept early on dormitory nights." The emphasis was on experiential learning, where rhythm, song, and dance symbolized joy, duty, and communal cohesion. Glancey confirms this: "The Nagas with their joie de vivre dance and songs are a part and parcel of all their festivities…" (Glancey 48). These spaces, governed by oral authority and shared experience, reflect Emile Durkheim's notion of collective conscience, a set of shared beliefs and moral attitudes that operate as a unifying force within society.

The respect for elders in the narrative affirms the communitarian ethical perspective, where moral worth is tied to social roles and responsibilities. Levi's parents, for instance, impart life lessons underscoring moderation, duty, and humility:

"Every individual has a social obligation to the village… A real man does not need to roar to show that he is a man." (Iralu 25)

Transformation through Faith

The turning point in the village's moral evolution occurs with the arrival of Christianity. The older moral order, grounded in ritual and tradition, begins to give way to one defined by scripture and doctrine. Sato's questioning of religious dichotomy, "The new religion says, do not steal and do not lie, how is it so different from the old religion?" (Iralu 101) reveals both continuity and dissonance between the two ethical systems.

Here, Max Weber's theory of rationalisation is applicable. The transition from oral, mythic systems to textual, rule-based religions such as Christianity reflects a broader process of disenchantment and moral codification. In contrast to the contextual and communal wisdom of the morung, the Christian message arrives as an abstract universal morality. While both old and new systems teach honesty and compassion, the source and authority of those values change, shifting from elders to scripture, from village ritual to organised religion.

Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics offers a rigorous theoretical framework for understanding Sato's moral transformation. Kant insists that moral duty is to be performed solely out of regard for duty itself, rather than in pursuit of happiness or external rewards. As he states, "In fact, when the thinking man has conquered the

temptation to vice, and is conscious of having done his (often hard) duty, he finds himself in a state of peace and satisfaction which may well be called happiness, in which virtue is her own reward. Now, says the eudaemonist, this delight, this happiness, is the real motive of his acting virtuously. The notion of duty, says he, does not immediately determine his will; it is only by means of happiness in prospect that he is moved to his duty" (Kant 6–7). This passage closely parallels Sato's experience, which attains a form of peace not derived from external benefit but from the fulfillment of his moral obligations. By forgiving familial betrayals and adhering to his sense of duty, Sato emerges as a moral exemplar, influencing his mother and others through his consistent commitment to principle.

Gender, Authority, and the Loss of Oral Power

One of the more significant shifts Kire presents is the change in gender roles and generational authority. In the traditional framework, women had specific responsibilities in family and ritual life, and elders were seen as the voices of wisdom and tradition. With the introduction of Christianity, new values such as forgiveness and moral equality are emphasised. At the same time, power becomes more centralised in male-led interpretation and church leadership. From the perspective of feminist ethics, this change limits the role of women, positioning them more as followers of moral teaching than as contributors to its meaning.

Sato's mother goes through a spiritual change that feels sincere. Yet her place remains shaped by the decisions of her son and husband. Her experience reflects the kind of moral thinking described by Carol Gilligan, where choices are made in relation to others and shaped by care. Her acceptance of Christianity does not come

from doctrine alone. It grows from her desire to repair bonds and to act with compassion. When she says, “I always hoped you would return to the old ways… I can see I was wrong” (Iralu 115), her words reveal the pain of letting go and the care that guides her decision.

Pelhou, one of the elders, holds on to his place in the community through trust and consistency. His statement, “If we have said there will be peace between us, there will be peace” (Iralu 86), is not only a call for calm but a reminder of the steady role elders continue to play. His presence, like that of Sato’s mother, offers a kind of leadership that is based less on authority and more on the need to hold people together.

But such moments are increasingly rare as the moral compass shifts toward written scripture and institutional religion. This evolution marks the decline of habitus (Bourdieu), the embodied social practices of the Nagas, and their replacement by institutional norms.

From Ritual to Doctrine: A Changing Moral Framework

Kire portrays this transition with restraint and clarity. The narrative traces a movement away from a communal moral world shaped by ritual, song, dance, and oral traditions, toward a system grounded in doctrine, literacy, and external spiritual authority. This transformation reflects Charles Taylor’s concept of the moral frameworks that underlie identity. As Taylor argues, people live within moral landscapes that give shape to their sense of self. In *A Naga Village Remembered,* that framework shifts from indigenous cosmology to Christian universalism.

Furthermore, the idea of a "changing syndrome" of morality encapsulates this layered transition. It's not a sudden rupture but a gradual, negotiated transformation. This includes:

A move from collective ethics to individual moral responsibility, a shift from oral traditions to textual authority, and a transformation of experiential wisdom into abstract ideology

As Reiss notes, "People do not live their lives in moral or ethical isolation but grow up within particular moral traditions" (Reiss 34). The Nagas are not losing morality; they are negotiating its evolving expression.

Ethical Evolution and Cultural Continuity

Easterine Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* is not simply a chronicle of a village's history but a moral anthropology. The novel mirrors the ethical dissonance that arises during cultural transitions, offering no simplistic binary between old and new. Instead, it shows a dynamic negotiation where traditional and modern, communal and individual, ritualistic and doctrinal, coexist and reshape each other.

Kire does not cast moral change as either inherently progressive or regressive. Instead, her narrative encourages readers to think carefully about how values shift over time, and what might be lost or gained in that process. In doing so, she contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations around moral pluralism and ethical transformation in postcolonial societies. Her approach resonates with the principles of moral relativism, which recognise that moral frameworks are often shaped by specific cultural and historical contexts. At the same time, Kire's storytelling reflects the ethos of narrative ethics, where lived experience becomes a

way of understanding right and wrong. By centering complexity rather than certainty, her work invites a deeper, more compassionate engagement with the ethical questions that arise in times of change.

3.5 *Bitter Wormwood*: Analysing Mose's Moral Character

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire presents a character whose life reflects the struggle between personal conviction and the demands of a larger political cause. Mose, a Naga man shaped by long periods of conflict, becomes a figure through whom questions of moral choice, responsibility, and loyalty are explored. His actions and reflections show a deep concern for peace, respect, and the values he grew up with. This chapter examines how Mose's ethical outlook takes shape through his relationships and the choices he faces in moments of uncertainty. It also considers the environment he lives in, where personal experience is shaped by history, belief, and collective memory. To support this reading, the chapter draws on Milton Rokeach's theory of values, using his categories of instrumental and terminal values to clarify Mose's moral priorities. Ideas from dialogic identity and postcolonial thought help to explore how Mose holds on to his principles in the midst of shifting social and political demands.

A Name with Meaning: Foundations of Moral Identity

Mose's journey begins with a name: Moselie, meaning "one who will meet life without guile" (Kire 17). This name is not incidental; it marks an intention, a hope embedded in cultural naming practices. His identity is shaped not by political ideology, but by familial and cultural expectations of empathy and honesty. This can

be understood through Rokeach's idea of terminal values, desirable end-states of existence such as "inner harmony," "a world at peace," and "true friendship." From the beginning, Mose is envisioned as someone who will embody those values, and the narrative confirms this.

His mother plays a key role in this early moral grounding. The neighbors praise her: "She had taught him well" (Kire 23), suggesting a community-wide recognition of moral upbringing. His teachers predict his future: "This boy will go far" (Kire 24), a reflection not just of academic promise but of his disciplined and principled character, aligning with Rokeach's instrumental values such as obedience, responsibility, and helpfulness.

In a postcolonial context, how a child is named and raised becomes part of holding on to cultural values. Through ordinary habits and close relationships, the home allows ethical awareness to develop in ways that remain steady, even as the world beyond shifts through political and historical change.

Violence and Moral Doubt: Choosing Restraint

When Mose sees a young Naga man killed, "He was very young. He looked barely twenty" (Kire 8), he does not respond with anger or thoughts of revenge, but with grief and a kind of stunned sorrow. In a brief exchange with a neighbour, the remark, "Maybe if we had guns too" (Kire 9), expresses the frustration of a community that has seen years of violence without finding a way to protect its future. The conversation does not call for revenge. It reflects a shared refusal to answer violence with more violence.

Mose's thoughts return to his early days in the Naga army: "It had not begun like this" (Kire 2). The line marks a quiet recognition that the original purpose has been lost. His choice not to retaliate is not weakness, but a decision shaped by deeply held values. In choosing restraint, he holds to an ethic that resists the pull of despair.The movement that once symbolized unity and freedom has turned violent and directionless. This inner monologue reveals a Bakhtinian dialogic self, a self that does not act automatically but reflects, evaluates, and engages in inner dialogue before acting.

Despite having the skill to retaliate, Mose chooses not to. This restraint is a moral decision, one guided by a lifelong value system rather than momentary anger. Rokeach would classify this as a prioritisation of interpersonal instrumental values like forgiveness, compassion, and self-control over aggression or dominance.

Maintaining Integrity within the Movement

Even after joining the underground movement, Mose remains respected not for his aggression but for his gentle demeanor:

"Mose's respectful nature endeared him to his superior officers and peers alike." (Kire 88)

This depiction of Mose challenges the stereotypical image of militant resistance, instead highlighting a quiet strength rooted in personal ethics. His relationships within the underground army reveal a man who does not lose himself in the ideological machinery of the group. Unlike others who may sacrifice personal convictions to align with the dominant faction or to gain favour within a volatile political structure, Mose retains his moral compass.

Kire presents a compelling postcolonial image of a man who must balance loyalty to a collective cause with the preservation of individual integrity. This tension between personal values and group ideology reflects a broader critique of factionalism: in revolutionary settings, loyalty often demands conformity, yet Mose resists becoming a mere instrument of the movement. His respectful nature not only humanises him but also subtly questions the ethics of violent resistance and the erasure of individuality within political struggles.

Thus, moral integrity becomes a quiet form of resistance in itself that endures even in the most ideologically charged environments.

Rokeach's theory helps frame this loyalty in terms of value conflict. On one hand, there are collective goals (freedom, justice); on the other, there are personal values (non violence, human dignity). Mose tries to harmonise both, but ultimately chooses the latter when forced to decide. His ability to remain ethical under pressure shows the strength of his internalised value system.

A Tragic End, a Moral Legacy

Mose's moral clarity is tragically tested when he intervenes in the beating of a migrant shopkeeper and is shot dead by fellow Nagas:

"The men unhesitatingly turned and shot him point blank… he lay dead with bullets in his throat and chest." (Kire 135)

This moment lays bare the bitter consequences of factional violence and the loss of moral direction within the movement. That Mose is killed not by an outsider, but by

his own people, is a sharp critique of internal fragmentation, one of the central concerns of postcolonial literature.

Yet even in death, Mose's values continue to speak. His grandson Neibou, in a letter, writes about his grandfather's dedication to the Naga cause and his commitment to teaching moral values:

"…how he had devoted his best years to the Naga cause… he ended with the appeal to the factional leaders to teach their members about the worth of each human life…" (Kire 226)

Here, Neibou's words become a dialogic continuation of Mose's voice. The grandson carries forward his ethical legacy, turning grief into a moral appeal. This aligns with Rokeach's idea of value transmission, how core beliefs are passed from one generation to another.

Furthermore, Jitu, the migrant boy Mose tried to protect, continues to cry out "Baba, baba" (Kire 240), a moment that deeply moves Neibou's family. Neilhounuo comments:

"I'm so touched that someone who is not even a family member would be so affected by your grandfather's death. This boy thinks of your grandfather as his saviour." (Kire 240–41)

This transcends blood and ethnicity, showing how universal values, like kindness and justice, resonate across communal lines. In a postcolonial society often divided along identity boundaries, Mose's life becomes a bridge, a rare figure that is mourned by both insiders and outsiders.

The Quiet Moral Voice

Mose does not seek the spotlight. His strength lies in silent resistance, in making ethical choices that defy both violence and apathy. He is, in a Bakhtinian sense, not a monologic hero but a dialogic presence, he listens, reflects, and acts in ways that open moral conversations rather than close them.

His life becomes a counter-narrative to the dominant story of conflict. In this way, Bitter Wormwood performs a kind of postcolonial recovery, reclaiming the moral narratives often buried beneath political histories. Mose's story invites readers to reflect on what it means to live ethically when the structures around you collapse.

Through the character of Mose, Easterine Kire crafts a portrait of moral integrity in the face of personal and political devastation. This portrayal of Mose resists the usual framing of the underground fighter as driven purely by ideology or vengeance. Instead, he is shown as someone guided by personal convictions, even while living within a political movement marked by division and shifting loyalties. His interactions with others in the underground army reveal a man who does not surrender his judgment to group demands. While some compromise their beliefs to gain position or survive internal tensions, Mose continues to act from a clear sense of what is right.

Mose's legacy is not limited to his role in the movement. It is found in the relationships he protected and the values he lived by. In a region shaped by conflict and by the unfinished history of colonial rule, his choices reflect a different kind of strength, one grounded in care, discipline, and the refusal to answer harm with hatred.

3.6 The Unbreakable Bond between Mose and Neituo: Exploring Their Moral and Ethical Conversations

The relationship between Mose and Neituo in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* develops through trust, reliability, and meaningful conversation. Both carry the burden of political conflict and personal loss, and their friendship offers a way to reflect on difficult choices without fear of judgment. Kire portrays their bond without sentimentality; it is steady, honest, and attentive to the conditions they live through. In a time when loyalty is tested and violence is common, the care they show one another becomes a quiet form of moral clarity.

Their conversations reflect a kind of moral attentiveness grounded in Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, where meaning is formed through genuine exchange between voices. They do not speak to arrive at final conclusions but to remain with the difficulty of what they witness and feel. This becomes more immediate when they see the army assault four civilians. What had once been distant, only heard in passing, becomes real and undeniable:

"They had heard stories of people being killed and tortured in the villages but not until today had they seen the brutality of the army attacks" (Kire 79).

After this moment, their conversations shift. They are no longer speaking from the edge of conflict, but from within it. Their sense of responsibility becomes more direct, shaped by what they now know firsthand.

This encounter with violence carried out by state forces leads Mose and Neituo to join the Naga underground movement. Their decision is not driven by political slogans or group loyalty, but by a growing sense of moral responsibility. They act not to serve a cause blindly, but because doing nothing begin to feel like complicity.

Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics offers a way to understand this choice, with its emphasis on duty, moral law, and respect for each person's dignity. For both characters, the decision to resist is not just political; it is ethical. As Kant writes,

"To every duty corresponds a right of action… but only the duties called legal duties imply a corresponding right… of another to compel anyone" (Kant 12).

This distinction between legal and ethical duty is crucial. While their actions may defy the law, they remain grounded in moral reasoning, reflecting on duties toward justice, truth, and human dignity. Kire portrays their decision-making as deeply introspective, highlighting that resistance, in their case, is an act of conscience, not ideology.

Their ethical clarity is further tested when discussing the role of young informants and factional soldiers. Neituo critically observes,

"I know that there are some who are doing it for the money" (Kire 98),

While Mose questions the ideological coherence of the younger fighters:

"Sometimes, I wonder if those young new soldiers in the factional group even know what they are fighting for" (Kire 161).

These exchanges unveil a profound critique of commodified nationalism and the erosion of ethical purpose within the struggle. Their voices serve as a postcolonial counter-narrative, challenging the idea that violence is inherently liberatory. Unlike the romanticised image of the revolutionary, Mose and Neituo navigate a moral grey zone, aware of their duties, yet disturbed by the fragmentation and commercialization of the resistance.

The two friends also articulate a shared philosophy of nonviolence and dignity, asserting that masculinity should not be tied to aggression. Mose remarks,

"Only a coward carries a weapon and makes a lot of noise. A real man doesn't need that" (Kire 162), to which Neituo replies with quiet despair,

"In these times, do you think they care what a real man is? Do they care about honourable behaviour?" (162).

Their lament captures the cultural disintegration they witness, where honour and ethical conduct are sacrificed for survival or status. This value system aligns with Milton Rokeach's emphasis on core human values like peaceful coexistence, integrity, and nonviolence. Neituo's final reflection "Funny how not carrying a gun changes a man completely" (Kire 170) highlights the transformative potential of disarmament and the ethical power of restraint.

Ultimately, Kire uses their bond to humanise abstract postcolonial dilemmas: the trauma of betrayal, the challenge of reconciliation, and the search for justice in a militarised space. Their friendship becomes a site of ethical resistance, a quiet, dialogic form of healing and critique. Drawing from Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," this relationship opens a space where colonial and nationalist narratives are reworked into a more intimate, morally grounded form of agency.

The relationship between Mose and Neituo exemplifies a postcolonial ethic rooted in empathy, moral clarity, and dialogic openness. Through their conversations, Kire presents a vision of resistance that is not grounded in violence, but in the patient, painful work of ethical discernment. Their bond shows that justice and healing begin with honest speech, careful listening, and the willingness to acknowledge another person's pain.

3.7 The Unyielding Connection between Neibou and Rakesh: A Study of Reconciliation

Neibou, a young Naga student, and Rakesh, an Indian mainlander, form a friendship that becomes central to Easterine Kire's exploration of reconciliation in a society marked by conflict. Their bond isn't easy or sentimental. It grows out of honest conversations, shared discomfort, and a refusal to accept inherited hatred as inevitable. Kire doesn't suggest that healing comes by forgetting the past. Instead, she shows that it begins when people face that past directly, with empathy, with pain, and with the courage to stay open.

Neibou's background, as the grandson of the Naga freedom fighter Mose and the son of Sabunuo, ties him directly to the political and emotional legacy of the Naga struggle. On the other hand, Rakesh's familial ties to a former Indian police officer stationed in Nagaland during the insurgency years suggest a convergence of personal histories that, by conventional logic, should breed mistrust and hostility. Instead, their relationship gradually becomes a microcosm of the ethical transformation that is possible when individuals engage with each other's truths.

Kire deliberately begins Neibou's journey in Delhi with alienation and cultural dislocation, underscoring the fractured relationship between the Northeast and the Indian mainland. "Neibou's new life at the Shri Ram College of Commerce did not begin well" (Kire 181). The ridicule and racial slurs he faces from seniors reflect a broader national ignorance and prejudice. Yet, Kire uses this setting not to reinforce stereotypes but to challenge them. Neibou's character, described as someone who "had never used his fists before" (Kire 182), reveals his inner strength in the form of restraint and moral resolve, qualities essential for peacemaking.

The pivotal turning point arrives when Rakesh, one of the seniors, approaches Neibou with an apology and a surprising connection: “You’re from Nagaland? Wow man! Wait till I tell my grandfather about this. He was there in the 60s” (Kire 183). This moment signals the start of a relationship founded not on denial or ignorance of history but on its mutual rediscovery. As Rakesh shares stories about his grandfather, Himat, who served in the region during the height of the conflict, the text begins to carefully juxtapose the two grandfathers, Mose, the insurgent, and Himat, the state officer. Rather than fueling old binaries, Kire allows these stories to dismantle them.

As Sebastian notes, Kire “focuses the reader’s attention on the reaction of the two friends, knowing about each other’s grandparents who happened to be enemies by virtue of their roles as soldiers, yet human beings with common emotions” (Kire 129). This insight reinforces Kire’s central moral argument: that enemy identities constructed through institutional roles can be transcended by recognising the shared humanity and suffering on both sides.

The planned meeting between the two grandfathers, though initially viewed as improbable, becomes a profound symbol of reconciliation. Himat’s narration of his time in Nagaland provides a counter-narrative to the dominant Indian perception of the Nagas as “primitive warmongers” (Kire 195). Through his words, “What I liked the most was their sense of equality… The community does so many things together” (Kire 201) Kire draws attention to the ethical fabric of Naga society: its dignity, hospitality, communal life, and egalitarian ethos. These are not just cultural traits but moral principles, indicating that peace and harmony are embedded within the Naga worldview.

Rakesh's own transformation occurs through direct experience. Upon visiting Nagaland and witnessing its warmth and authenticity, he acknowledges, "So these were the Nagas… so very different from what he had expected" (Kire 222). This moment of cognitive dissonance becomes ethically productive: it forces a reevaluation of previously held biases. Similarly, Himat's declaration, "If the Nagas want their own country, let them have it… not to lose so many lives over" (Kire 201), challenges nationalist rhetoric and speaks to a more humane, morally informed understanding of self-determination and the cost of militarism.

The death of Mose, Neibou's grandfather, reintroduces the temptation of revenge into the narrative. Kire, however, deliberately resists falling into the trope of cyclical violence. Instead, she portrays Neibou's internal conflict and his ultimate decision to forgo vengeance as a pivotal moment of ethical maturity. "The man who takes up the gun must be sure he does it for the right reasons. The reason, said he, should be love, not hate" (Kire 237). This moral stance resonates with Immanuel Kant's ethical philosophy, particularly his formulation of the categorical imperative: one should act only according to maxims that can be willed as universal laws. Neibou's refusal to retaliate is not a sign of weakness, but a conscious exercise of moral will grounded in duty and human dignity. By choosing not to perpetuate violence, he affirms a universal ethical principle, one that upholds the intrinsic worth of humanity and resists reducing others, even enemies, to mere instruments of retribution.

Moreover, the post-murder dialogues between Neibou, Rakesh, and Dipti highlight ethical alternatives to retributive justice. The notion that violent offenders are "deeply brutalised" and in need of "a life-changing experience" (Kire 233) aligns with restorative justice models, which focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment.

These reflections are also critiques of corrupted religiosity. As Dipti observes, "Christianity is a lifestyle and not just a religion…The factions have even used the slogan 'Nagaland for Christ' and killed drug addicts and drug pushers" (Kire 235). Kire's critique is clear: true spirituality should embody compassion and transformation, not be weaponised to justify violence.

The most poignant philosophical reflection comes from Neibou's grandmother, who reminds him, "That is the old culture… But now, we are to take our burdens to Jisu and leave it with him" (Kire 241). Her words transcend religious dogma to embody the principle of ethical forgiveness. Forgiveness here is not a passive act, but a conscious decision to interrupt the generational transmission of pain. It is about breaking the cycle of violence, even at great emotional cost.

Kire captures the layered nature of forgiveness in the final dialogue between Neibou and Rakesh. Neibou confesses, "Maybe it is not forgiving that I do… but something else… like… choosing to survive" (Kire 242). Forgiveness, then, is not a singular event but a daily, evolving moral practice. Rakesh aptly concludes: "Forgiveness is a big, big word… It is the destination, not the doorway" (242). This statement underscores the existential struggle involved in moral reconciliation and affirms Kire's vision that peace is a choice sustained over time, not an immediate resolution.

The final metaphor of the "bitter wormwood," a herb used in Naga tradition to ward off evil, encapsulates the entire arc of the novel. It is both a literal and symbolic cure, a reminder that the healing of historical wounds lies not in forgetting the past but in confronting it with the ethical tools of compassion, memory, and transformation. Rakesh's musing, "The Nagas of today have forgotten to use it", followed by Neibou's hope, "Maybe we should start using it again" (Kire 243), and offers a

redemptive conclusion. It implies that the next generation, if equipped with the values of empathy and forgiveness, can indeed reclaim the moral vision that war and trauma once threatened to erase.

Easterine Kire's portrayal of Neibou and Rakesh speaks to the possibility of reconciliation after deep division and harm. Their relationship grows not through avoidance, but through moments of honesty, discomfort, and trust. Kire avoids casting them into fixed roles of victim or oppressor, choosing instead to show two people learning to see each other beyond divisions shaped by history. Their friendship does not offer easy resolution. Instead, it suggests that healing begins when people face the past together and choose care over resentment.

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CHAPTER FOUR

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND VALUES IN THE SELECT WORKS OF TEMSULA AO

4.1 These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone – Exploring the Ethical Dimensions of Conflict

In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone,* Temsula Ao focuses on how the Indo-Naga conflict affects the lives of ordinary people. The stories are told from different points of view, including those of insurgents, soldiers, villagers, women, and children. No single voice is made to speak for the whole, and no clear side is taken. By keeping these perspectives open and unresolved, Ao allows the complexity of the situation to speak for itself. The stories do not offer easy answers, but instead ask the reader to think carefully about what it means to live through conflict.

Ao's fiction can be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony, where meaning is shaped through dialogue and no single voice claims authority. Her stories reflect the shifting experience of Naga identity, shaped by a long history of trauma and the persistent presence of militarisation. The perspectives she presents, which are often conflicting, incomplete, or unresolved, build a sense of shared memory that resists easy interpretation. These narratives point not only to the violence inflicted by the Indian state, but also to conflicts and divisions within Naga society itself. Ao's work doesn't try to offer answers. Instead, it acknowledges silence, doubt, and the ethical difficulties of living under occupation.

The collection moves through a form of ethics shaped by community, where morality is not defined by abstract principles but by lived experience within the Naga context.

Decisions are formed in relation to others, informed by shared memory, cultural expectations, and the pressure of history. Characters like Imchanok and Lalien are not positioned as moral exemplars. They are ordinary individuals facing complex choices in a world marked by fear, silence, and betrayal. Their actions do not resolve ethical questions but expose the difficulty of making decisions when certainty is absent. In this context, ethics takes on a quieter form, less about choosing right over wrong, and more about responding to difficult situations with care and awareness. Ao does not preach. Her prose carries tension and restraint, revealing a way of knowing shaped by the realities of survival and the strength of those pushed to the edges of society.

The hills mentioned in the title feel present throughout the text. They do not speak, but they seem to hold everything that has happened, silent witnesses to suffering. The land is not just there in the background. It holds on to what has been lived. It carries the marks of loss, of people forced to leave, of violence that was never fully acknowledged. Ao writes with care, never letting the reader forget how the past and the land remain connected. What remains is not only the physical world but a sense of persistence. Despite efforts to erase both people and history, something stays alive: dignity, identity, the strength to continue.

One of the central concerns that run through Ao's work is the question of identity. Drawing from postcolonial thought, especially the ideas of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, identity is shown as something shaped through experience. It is not fixed, but continually formed between cultures. Ao examines how Naga identity develops in the tension between inherited customs and external influences, between enforced quiet and the struggle to speak. Her stories reveal the deep uncertainty

experienced by Naga communities as they contend with both the authority of the Indian state and the ideological demands of underground groups. These forces do not only shape political structures. They also reach into private life, influencing how individuals understand themselves and their relation to the world.

In "The Night", Imnala's story draws attention to how subaltern life is shaped by gender, revealing its impact in a clear and deeply personal way.

Her two pregnancies outside wedlock place her in a vulnerable and precarious position within a community that prioritises male authority and moral surveillance over female autonomy. As the narrative reveals, "The pregnant girl, whose name is Imnala, knew what would happen in the meeting the next day, requisitioned by the wronged wife of the man whose child was kicking inside her body…" (Ao 44). This moment not only signals the immediate scandal surrounding her but also exposes a wider structure of social power that punishes female desire while absolving male culpability. Imnala's moral fall, as perceived by her community, is shaped less by her actions in isolation and more by the deeply embedded cultural codes that render women susceptible to shame and silence.

However, it is precisely through her silence and refusal to explain or defend her that Imnala unsettles the assumptions of communal morality. Her endurance becomes a quiet yet potent act that resists the community's demand for confession, remorse, or submission. Rather than reinforcing the dominant narrative of female guilt and moral failure, her silence reframes the terms of judgment and reveals the asymmetrical burden placed on women in matters of sexuality and honour. In refusing to articulate contrition or offer a defence, Imnala challenges the performative structures of patriarchal discipline, drawing attention to the gendered nature of collective justice.

This instance, when read alongside other representations of female vulnerability in Ao's collection, points to a larger thematic concern with how women's agency is negotiated within the intersections of tradition, violence, and communal expectation. Imnala's calm composure before the village council, even as she is vilified and subjected to public scrutiny, functions as more than mere stoicism; it is a significant act of resistance. Her endurance in the face of social condemnation reflects a form of strength that does not rely on outward defiance. She neither accepts the role of a victim nor seeks sympathy. Her response avoids familiar ideas of protest shaped by visible or vocal opposition. Instead, her actions speak through restraint and stillness. This form of resistance recalls Spivak's reading of the subaltern, where meaning often takes shape not through speech but through physical presence, withheld responses, and acts that cannot easily be read by dominant norms. Imnala does not ask to be understood on the terms set by others. Her refusal becomes a form of insistence, measured, difficult, and deeply political. As the text notes, "But she was determined to take life one day at a time… she would sleep well because her unborn child had heard the father say, 'you are mine" (Ao 56). Despite the shame directed at her by the community, Imnala remains committed to her responsibilities, especially through her care for her child and her refusal to accept the judgment placed upon her. Her actions arise from ties of kinship and the specific pressures of her daily life, not from any desire for approval. Her worth is not undone by the rejection she faces from others; it continues through the care she provides to those who depend on her. Ao presents maternal labour not as sentiment but as a conscious and sustained response to being treated as if she no longer belongs. In doing so, Imnala resists being cast

aside and holds her place without appealing to the standards of those who have condemned her.

Imnala's narrative also shows how gender intersects with subalternity in specific cultural contexts, where women's bodies become sites of moral surveillance. The community's harsh attention to her perceived sexual transgressions reflects a deeply gendered understanding of honour and purity, where women are expected to bear the burden of the group's moral expectations. Thus, her experience reveals how subaltern women are controlled on multiple fronts, first through patriarchal authority, and then through communal judgment that strips them of the right to act or speak on their own terms.

Her refusal to defend herself is not a silence of submission, but a deliberate withholding that interrupts the community's demand for confession or remorse. In this stillness, Ao draws attention to a different kind of speech that refuses recognition but draws its force from the conviction that her life needs no justification.

The theme of identity, equally complex, is vividly explored in the character of Soaba, whose presence in the narrative disrupts normative configurations of belonging and selfhood. "No one really knew who his parents were or which village he came from…" (Ao 9) Soaba's orphanhood, namelessness, and deep alienation dramatise the condition of the postcolonial subject who exists on the periphery of collective memory and institutional recognition. Even his name, 'Soaba', meaning 'idiot', reflects a form of imposed naming that denies him the right to self-definition, reducing his identity to a term of ridicule. This act of naming serves to mark him as lesser, showing how language can participate in drawing social boundaries and denying the individual a place within the community. His life is marked not by

monumental acts of defiance but by the quiet devastations of hunger, homelessness, and neglect, conditions that often fall beneath the threshold of political attention but are foundational to understanding subaltern existence.

Soaba's story foregrounds what Gayatri Spivak has described as "epistemic dispossession", a condition in which the subaltern is not merely materially deprived but also denied the discursive resources necessary to articulate their experiences within dominant epistemologies. In this context, Soaba's sense of self remains uncertain, not because he lacks depth or feeling, but because his life has unfolded in circumstances that leave little room for self-definition. The Western idea of identity as something stable and shaped by personal choice does not speak to his experience. His story is not one of self-making but of living through abandonment, neglect, and the lasting effects of being kept at the margins. What may seem like a personal struggle is part of a broader condition faced by many in postcolonial societies, where people come to understand themselves not through stable progression but through interruption, movement, and the traces left by a shared past.

Soaba's alienation is not merely psychological; it reflects a deeper communal loss. His social invisibility points to the damage done to communities torn apart by war and colonial disruption. The usual ties of belonging, kin, land, memory, have been severed. Understanding his story requires more than Western notions of the self. Identity here is formed through relationships and place. The lack of clear origin points toward a wider collapse of memory and continuity under colonial and postcolonial pressure.

Together, the stories of Imnala and Soaba reveal the lasting effects of gendered violence and disrupted histories. Imnala's experience shows how women are judged

and punished for stepping outside the moral codes upheld by a patriarchal society. Soaba's life, in turn, questions the dominant ways in which identity is defined in the aftermath of colonial rule. These narratives remind us that agency may not necessarily appear as open resistance. It often rests in the effort to endure, to remember, and to protect one's identity in a world that denies one's full recognition.

"The Night" does not offer a clear divide between power and powerlessness. Its characters live through the aftermath of gendered violence, colonial loss, and the unraveling of kinship. Their stories are not framed as triumph or tragedy. Instead, the novel stays with what cannot be resolved, moments of survival, memory, and meaning made under pressure. It pays close attention to what often slips past notice: how people keep going when the world refuses to hold them.

In "The Jungle Major", Temsula Ao tells the story of Khatila, a woman whose moral clarity stands apart from the violence that surrounds her. While Punaba is drawn into revolutionary action, Khatila responds to her world through care, responsibility, and the demands of immediate survival. Caught between the Indian military and Naga rebels, her choices reflect a kind of ethical reasoning shaped through personal experience over detached ideals. She resists not by following a script of resistance, but by moving with attentiveness to the people around her. Through Khatila, Ao reveals a different kind of strength, one that works quietly against the masculine ideals of honour and sacrifice that dominate political conflict.

Khatila's strength is quiet, but it leaves no doubt. Under pressure from both the state and the insurgents, she acts with care, precision, and a deep sense of responsibility. Her form of resistance does not rely on confrontation; it works through the preservation of family, memory, and community. This is not a retreat from politics

but a different form of courage, one that refuses the noise and violence that often defines revolutionary action. Ao's portrayal invites us to rethink power, not as the ability to dominate, but as a commitment to ethical clarity and the work of holding people together when everything threatens to fall apart.

Khatila's moral choices reflect an ethic grounded in relationship and care. Her sense of responsibility arises not from abstract rules, but from proximity, love, and shared vulnerability. This recalls Levinas's idea that ethical obligation begins in the presence of another, where the face of the other calls one to respond. Khatila does not act on behalf of a political cause; she acts for the people around her. Her resistance does not follow the logic of heroism, but takes shape in quiet acts of protection and moral clarity.

Khatila's moral choices speak to an ethic that is deeply communal.

In "The Jungle Major", resistance is not loud. It does not come with slogans or dramatic choices. Instead, it appears in the small, deliberate actions of Khatila. She watches closely, decides carefully, and does what she must to protect those around her. There is no claim to political purity, no performance of strength. Yet within her mode of existence lies a quiet insistence on the significance of life. Gramsci once wrote about the organic intellectual, someone who learns from life, not institutions, and thinks from inside their community. Khatila fits that shape. Without naming it, without needing recognition, she holds a kind of authority that makes survival possible.

Khatila's way of moving through the world reflects what Homi Bhabha has described as vernacular cosmopolitanism, an ethic shaped not by universal ideologies, but by local ties, memory, and everyday care. Her choices do not follow

political scripts. They emerge from relationships, from the need to protect and to endure. What is often dismissed as emotional or domestic becomes, in her story, a quiet refusal of violence. In a world unsettled by conflict, Khatila shows that resistance can be slow, relational, and rooted in the work of holding life together.

This foregrounding of gendered agency and ethical intelligence is further enriched when placed in intertextual conversation with Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*. Kire's work amplifies the historical memory of state-sponsored atrocities in Nagaland, thus complementing Ao's fictional representations with testimonial resonance. For instance, when Kire writes, "There's so much I have learnt about the Nagas…Rapes and tortures of the Naga villagers. Many of them died from torture and starvation…" (Kire 204), she contributes to a counter-narrative that directly challenges the silencing mechanisms of state historiography. This intertextuality reinforces the postcolonial project that both authors undertake: to retrieve and reclaim Naga identity, dignity, and historical agency from dominant narratives that have long marginalized or distorted them.

In this sense, *These Hills Called Home* functions as something beyond a literary exploration of war; it becomes a conversation about ethical and epistemological intervention. Viewed through a Bakhtinian lens, Ao's fiction exhibits what Mikhail Bakhtin terms heteroglossia, a polyphonic structure that resists the imposition of a single, authoritative voice. Instead, Ao presents a dialogic interplay of perspectives, where the fragmented and often suppressed voices of women, elders, soldiers, and survivors are all given narrative space. This plurality mirrors the fractured nature of Naga communal memory itself, scarred by conflict, colonialism, and internal dissonance, and offers a literary space where these voices can coexist, contradict, and

converse. Such polyphony does more than enrich the form; it performs a political act by disrupting the homogenising tendencies of both nationalist and insurgent discourses. In doing so, Ao's work not only restores narrative agency to the subaltern but also foregrounds the complex, multi-vocal texture of lived Naga realities.

Khatila's actions do not follow the logic of dominant politics. She does not speak from a place of power, yet her decisions carry weight. They are shaped by memory, by care, and by a refusal to let violence define what is possible. Her way of knowing emerges from the ground she stands on, from what is close, lived, and hard-earned. In this, she echoes what Gayatri Spivak calls epistemic disobedience: a break from imposed ways of thinking that leave little room for the voices of the marginalised. Ao does not present this as theory, but as life. Through Khatila, she shows us how resistance can be quiet, steady, and rooted in the refusal to forget.

Khatila does not resist with weapons or slogans. Her strength is in how she cares, how she chooses to hold things together when others are pulled toward destruction. In a world shaped by conflict, where vengeance is often mistaken for justice, she takes another route. What guides her is not submission but a refusal to let violence decide what the future should look like. Ao does not present this as weakness. She shows instead a kind of moral clarity rooted in care, in connection, and in the quiet labour of preserving life. Khatila's decisions are intentional, deeply ethical, and quietly defiant.

Taken as a whole, *These Hills Called Home* invites a deeper understanding of how people live through violence without giving in to it. The story does not seek heroes, but pays attention to those who act with care, who remembers, and who chooses not to return harm for harm. Through characters like Khatila, Ao offers a form of ethical

life shaped by relationships and quiet responsibility. Her fiction opens space for a moral imagination rooted in the everyday, for ways of thinking about justice and survival that begin not with power, but with attention to the lives most often overlooked.

4.2 Laburnum for My Head: Identity as a Crown of Fulfilment

In *Laburnum for My Head*, both the title story and the collection as a whole offer a reflective exploration of identity, agency, and ethical legacy within the cultural and spiritual landscapes of Northeast India. Temsula Ao's writing, grounded in the lived conditions of the Naga people, resists overt confrontation. Instead, it articulates an expression of "quiet insurgency" that privileges dignity and narrative self-determination over spectacle.

Lentina, the protagonist, exemplifies this ethic with clarity and purpose. Her wish, that "a humble laburnum tree should bloom once a year on her crown" (Ao 20), is not merely a personal preference. It is a symbolic act, a subtle but radical assertion of selfhood that challenges conventional practices of death, memorialisation, and institutional authority. Through this gesture, Lentina asserts the right to be remembered on her own terms, shaping a legacy rooted in simplicity, nature, and autonomy.

This is evident in the narrator's early observation: "It all started with a woman named Lentina and her desire to have some laburnum bushes in her garden. The way the laburnum flowers hung their heads earthward appealed to her because she attributed humility to the gesture" (Ao 2). This interpretive alignment between the

natural world and personal ethics is not coincidental; it reflects a cosmological vision in which the natural and the human are not dichotomous but co-constitutive.

Through this lens, Ao's narrative displaces dominant, often Euro-Christian, paradigms of death and memorialisation that rely heavily on permanence, hierarchy, and textual inscription. In place of gravestones and monuments, symbols of static legacy, Lentina proposes a landscape animated by seasonal renewal and egalitarian memory. The burial plot, secured through legal and bureaucratic means, becomes a contested terrain, a site where multiple epistemologies and ontologies intersect. The conditions laid out in Lentina's legal document are telling in this regard:

1. Graves must have flowering trees, not headstones.
2. Lentina shall choose the first plot.
3. Plots are to be identified by numbers only, with names recorded separately.
4. All conditions are to be widely publicised and adhered to (Ao 11–12).

These stipulations transcend administrative convenience; they represent a deliberate act of cultural and spiritual reorientation. By removing the headstone, a symbol historically tied to class, religious denomination, and familial lineage, Lentina democratises death and its remembrance. Her vision for the cemetery aligns with Indigenous perspectives in which the land is not inert territory but a vibrant archive, a site of memory that is cyclical, inclusive, and alive. As such, the cemetery becomes a form of narrative resistance, a space where meaning is produced not through hierarchies of legacy, but through shared ecological renewal.

Significantly, the story situates this act of reclamation within a broader framework of legal and theological contestation. Lentina's anticipation of institutional resistance,

particularly by the town committee and the Church, which conventionally regulated burial practices, illustrates the deep entanglements between authority, land, and symbolic order. By pre-empting opposition with a legal document, Lentina reclaims a measure of agency within systems historically designed to circumscribe it. In doing so, Ao challenges the legitimacy of institutional power to define sacred space and memory, offering instead a counter-epistemology grounded in personal sovereignty and collective renewal.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, the cemetery in *Laburnum for My Head* operates as a chronotope, a literary configuration wherein time and space are intrinsically fused into a meaningful whole (Bakhtin 1981). Within this framework, Lentina's burial site transcends its immediate physicality to become a temporal continuum, wherein the past (ancestral memory), present (Lentina's agency), and future (the seasonal blooming of laburnum trees) are sutured into a single experiential locus. Her insistence that the tree be planted before her death, "She had to see the tree bloom before she breathed her last" (Ao 6), illustrates a desire not merely for posthumous remembrance, but for a lived, embodied continuity between life and death. In this, the grave ceases to be a terminal point: it becomes a portal, a space of temporal confluence where the symbolic and the organic intermingle.

Moreover, when viewed through Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, the coexistence of multiple, irreducible voices within a narrative, the text reveals deeper layers of contestation. Lentina's voice, though singular in her resolve, resonates within a broader field of dialogic tension: between institutional authority and indigenous practice, between patriarchal norms and feminine agency, and between individual desire and communal memory. In centering Lentina's seemingly private act of burial,

Ao amplifies a polyphonic interplay of histories and identities often silenced or marginalised in dominant discourses. The story thus becomes not only reclamation of space but reclamation of voice, a counter-narrative to the hegemonic structures that define what constitutes the sacred, the legal, or the memorable. In this way, Ao does not merely narrate resistance; she performs it through a narrative form that embodies plurality itself.

This chronotopic reading is further deepened by the narrative's dialogic structure, where multiple voices and perspectives come together to shape meaning. Lentina's inner thoughts, her legal negotiations, spiritual reflections, and quiet encounters with cultural norms all contribute to a narrative that holds several perspectives in tension. This polyphonic quality allows the story to resist any fixed or singular interpretation, leaving room for openness and interpretive depth. Her story becomes dialogic not only in structure but also in theme, as it speaks across generational, institutional, and cosmological registers. This openness to multiple voices allows the narrative to hold different meanings in conversation with one another. Importantly, this polyphony echoes the fragmented voices that characterise Naga identity, shaped by colonial history, missionary presence, clan-based customs, and the pressures of modern state politics.

The interplay between Christianity and indigenous spirituality, and between official policy and personal choice, creates a space where meaning remains open and shaped by different experiences. The laburnum tree becomes a dialogic symbol. Its meaning is not fixed or singular. It suggests humility, defiance, remembrance, transience, and beauty. It becomes a place where divided memories and uncertain identities exist

together. Their connection does not come through resolution, but through their presence within the story.

Furthermore, Lentina's narrative aligns with Indigenous feminist thought, particularly in its emphasis on land-based agency and its challenge to institutional authority. Indigenous women's relationships with land and memory often act as quiet forms of resistance to colonial systems of knowledge and control. In this context, Lentina's story reflects an ethical way of relating grounded in place-based practices and reciprocal care. Her wish to replace stone with plants, hierarchy with humility, and legacy with seasonal renewal expresses a deeply indigenous ethic of memory and identity.

Moreover, by placing her final act of agency within a legal setting, Lentina challenges the assumed divide between Indigenous knowledge and modern institutions. Her decision is shaped by personal and cultural belief, yet she carries it out through formal legal procedures. In doing so, she shows that Indigenous values can work within existing systems without being diminished.

Laburnum for My Head is not merely a story about a woman's burial preferences; what unfolds is a philosophical treatise on the nature of identity, death, and ecological ethics. Lentina's wish to have a laburnum tree planted at her grave becomes a potent metaphor for a life lived in quiet resistance, ethical consciousness, and spiritual continuity. Ao's narrative thus invites readers to reconsider prevailing assumptions about selfhood, legacy, and land, offering instead a vision in which identity is not monumental but relational, not fixed but cyclical, not hierarchical but egalitarian. Through the modest yet luminous symbol of the laburnum tree, identity

itself becomes a crown, not of dominance or permanence, but of fulfillment, humility, and regenerative beauty.

4.3 Trust and Intimacy Between Lentina and Her Driver Mapu

Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* presents a thoughtful portrayal of intimacy that challenges conventional hierarchies. The narrative is the evolving connection between Lentina and her driver, Mapu (affectionately called Babu), which grows through trust, emotional care, and mutual dependence. Ao does not highlight this shift through overt events. Instead, it unfolds through silences, small gestures, and daily interactions, gradually softening the boundaries between employer and employee.

The laburnum tree, described as "bedecked in its seasonal glory, standing tall over all the other plants, flourishing in perfect co-existence, in an environment liberated from all human pretensions to immortality" (Ao 20), is more than a symbol of Lentina's personal peace. It becomes a quiet testament to the kind of connection she shares with Mapu that grows from respect, patience, and mutual care. The tree blooms each May, standing alone but not apart, resisting the need to dominate or endure forever. In its presence, we see a reflection of a bond that is not loud or dramatic but steady, rooted in shared understanding and shaped by dignity rather than status.

Lentina's alienation from her family, who view her affection for the laburnum as irrational, marks a moment of emotional exile. "Lentina's husband and her children were convinced that she was developing an unhealthy fetish for laburnum… She could not understand their concern and was inwardly hurt by their seeming insensitivity to beauty around them" (Ao 4). Her disappointment in familial

insensitivity leads her to Mapu, whose consistency and gentleness contrast sharply with her family's indifference. His calm acceptance of the nickname "Babu," even when adopted by elders, exemplifies his quiet humility: "The driver's name was Mapu but every one called him Babu… The name stuck and Mapu good-naturedly did not object…" (Ao 5). This moment encapsulates his reliability and capacity for silent moral presence.

From this point, Lentina increasingly relies on Mapu for emotional and practical support. Her request that he help her secure a burial plot reflects not mere dependence but a conscious recognition of his ethical reliability. "My place is here and you are going to see that the Town Committee gives a written commitment on this… But mind you, no one at home is to be told… Will you keep my secret?" (Ao 6). This trust is a pivotal narrative moment: Mapu is no longer a mere employee but a moral equal, a steward of Lentina's final wishes. As Martha Nussbaum argues, the ethical life depends not just on reason but on "the intelligence of emotions," which guide us toward recognizing the dignity of others (Nussbaum 1).

Mapu's response is characterised not by passive obedience but by active care. He discreetly secures the plot and follows Lentina's instructions with integrity. "Once again, Lentina withdrew to her bedroom and began to worry… The only person she could rely upon… was Babu" (Ao 8). His engagement with her project is collaborative and empathetic. As Joan Tronto notes, care is a political and ethical act that requires attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness (Tronto 133). Mapu's actions consistently meet this standard.

As Lentina's health declines, her dependence on Mapu grows. "Babu, the ever-faithful friend, for this is how she thought of him now, brought news about many

things including that of her treasured plants" (Ao 14). Notably, Ao describes Mapu as a "friend" rather than a servant, a lexical shift that indicates a deeper ethical transformation. This culminates in moments of protective care, as when "Babu… stood guard outside the door to see that they [visitors] did not stay too long" (14–15). In safeguarding her space, he becomes the guardian of her dignity.

The narrative makes explicit the dismantling of class-based boundaries: "Till the time of her husband's death… she had always maintained a discreet distance as befitting a master-servant relationship. But she gradually broke down the barriers…A strong-willed woman and her faithful servant were thus drawn into an unusual bond of common humanity, based on trust and loyalty" (Ao 16–17). The phrase "common humanity" is critical here. It captures a Levinasian ethics of encounter, where the recognition of the other is not conditioned by status but by vulnerability and fidelity.

Ao's portrayal of this bond also critiques social systems that deny agency to women and subalterns. Lentina's choice to shape the terms of her passing and remembrance resists both patriarchal norms and bureaucratic processes. Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" resonates here, not because Lentina or Mapu are entirely silenced, but because their resistance unfolds through relational ethics rather than overt rebellion (Spivak 271). Lentina finds voice and agency not through confrontation but through an ethical alliance with Mapu, someone whom society deems her inferior. Yet it is precisely Mapu's steadfast loyalty and care that exemplify a subaltern ethic: one that challenges hierarchical constructs of identity and value by asserting dignity through presence, not power.

In this light, Ao's narrative becomes a form of resistance literature. It suggests that the most enduring legacies are not monumental but relational. Lentina's choice to

plant a laburnum instead of erecting a conventional grave marker reflects a broader philosophy: memory should bloom, not be built; identity should flourish, not be fossilised. The bond between Lentina and Mapu becomes the living soil in which this philosophy is rooted.It offers a rare literary vision of dignity where worth comes not from social position but from the ability to care, to remain faithful, and to change one another through quiet, attentive presence.

In her short story "The Three Women", Temsula Ao explores how identity takes shape through memory, suffering, and the need for recognition. Through the lives of Martha, Medemla, and the grandmother, women from different social and cultural worlds, Ao shows how the search for selfhood is marked by silence, pain, and quiet resilience. Identity is not something fixed or inherited; it unfolds through response to others and to one's own past.

Martha's story begins with an act of self-naming: "I am Martha and this is my story, of how I am different and not really so at the same time" (Ao 63). Her words point to the tension between belonging and exclusion, between how she sees herself and how the world sees her. Her words prefigure a dual struggle, between sameness and difference, belonging and exclusion. Her early experiences of racial and ethnic marginalisation, marked by derogatory labels such as "coolie" and remarks on her "strange features" and "dark complexion," situate her in a liminal space. These moments of alienation catalyze a crisis not only of personal identity but of ethical self-understanding. When confronted with the painful revelation, "Don't you know that you do not belong to our village and that Medemla is not your real mother?" (Ao 64), Martha is thrust into a confrontation with the Other, where the very foundations of her selfhood are destabilised.

This rupture resonates profoundly with Emmanuel Levinas's ethical phenomenology, which posits that "subjectivity is not for itself; it is initially for the other" (Levinas 83). For Levinas, the self emerges not as an autonomous, self-contained entity but as one constituted through ethical responsibility to the Other. Martha's identity crisis is therefore not merely psychological but profoundly ethical; it is defined by her encounter with alterity, the gaze of the Other, and the imperative to respond ethically to the narratives imposed upon her. Her anguished question, "Where did I belong and who were my people?" (Ao 65), transcends the search for genealogical roots and gestures toward what Charles Taylor terms "strong evaluations," or the moral frameworks through which individuals define what is worth pursuing and affirming in life (Taylor 34).

Martha's identity crisis begins with the sudden realisation that she does not belong where she thought she did. Learning about her adoption unsettles her sense of self and opens up a quiet, painful dislocation. This moment is not just personal, it reflects a pattern across Ao's writing, where characters are often caught between broken histories, mixed cultural inheritances, and the silence left by older generations. Martha's question, "Where did I belong and who were my people?" speaks to a deeper uncertainty that comes when memory is clouded and family roots are hard to trace. In Ao's world, lineage is not a clear path to identity. Instead, it is often fragile, uncertain, and filled with gaps. Through Martha's experience, the story suggests that true belonging might not come from blood or history, but from how a person chooses to live, with care, with responsibility, and with a willingness to face suffering honestly.

Taylor's conception of identity as dialogically and morally constituted is pivotal here. Martha's emotional turbulence, her oscillation between resentment, grief, and eventual reflection, exemplifies what Taylor identifies as the self's entanglement in webs of value. Her identity is not a matter of empirical facts but of evaluative commitments, of answering the moral question: "What kind of person should I be given this truth?" The revelation of her adoption thus becomes a moment of ethical awakening, one that invites both sorrow and moral clarity.

In contrast to Martha's turmoil, Medemla's narrative unfolds through an ethic of care and chosen responsibility. Her heartbreak following Imsutemjen's rejection, "Was there anything peculiar or different in me that repelled his father?" (Ao 66) initially suggests internalised feelings of inferiority and self-doubt. Yet this moment of vulnerability becomes a catalyst for moral agency rather than bitterness. Her decision to adopt Martha, not as compensation for romantic loss but as a deliberate act of care, signals the emergence of what Paul Ricoeur terms the "capable self." According to Ricoeur, identity is not static but enacted through responsibility and ethical engagement; the self is constituted through its capacity to act, to care, and to respond to others. Medemla's reflection, "And then Martha came into my life as though ordained by some unknown powers" (Ao 67), evokes not passive fatalism but a chosen openness to the other. Her action exemplifies the Ricoeurian self: not merely enduring hardship, but transforming it into a ground for ethical becoming.

Medemla's moral strength is most visible in how she questions what it means to be a woman. Her private reflection, "Why did I never feel that way with Imsu? Am I abnormal or just a different kind of woman?" (Ao 77–78) marks a turning point. Instead of following expected ideas of love or marriage, she begins to shape her life

around care, responsibility, and quiet resilience. This way of living reflects what Carol Gilligan calls an "ethics of care," where moral decisions are rooted in relationships and attentiveness to others, rather than rules or judgment. Medemla's choices do not reject her cultural world. In fact, they draw strength from it. Naga traditions value kinship, mutual care, and responsibility across generations. By tending to her family and staying true to herself, Medemla lives out a distinctly Naga form of feminist ethics, one where care is not weakness, but a deep form of moral courage.

The grandmother's silence may seem like avoidance, but it holds meaning. She chooses not to tell Martha the truth. This is not indifference. It is a quiet act of protection. She tries to guard Martha from pain. Her silence creates a space between love and honesty. Paul Ricoeur's idea of narrative identity helps us read this moment. He writes, "We become ourselves by appropriating the stories of our lives and integrating them into a coherent narrative" (Ao 140). Identity does not depend only on what is said. It also forms through what is left unsaid. The grandmother's silence becomes part of the story. It speaks of restraint, care, and the quiet cost of love.

In the Naga context, silence can carry meaning just as deeply as words. The grandmother's silence is not passive. It comes from the weight of memory, from a life shaped by loss, fear, and change. She chooses not to speak because she hopes to protect Martha from the pain she has carried. Her silence holds care. In many Naga communities, storytelling is tied to the sacred. Speaking is not only a way to share; it is a way to honour. In this context, to remain silent can also be a choice made with love. It can be a way to guard what is too heavy to pass on. The grandmother's silence is not a lack of voice. It is a way of holding space for the past and shielding

the future. She carries her story quietly. Not to erase it, but to hold it with respect. This choice does not make her weak. It gives her strength. It shows that identity is shaped not only through what is told, but also through what is kept close, out of care, grief, and a sense of what must be protected.

When the grandmother finally allows the truth of Martha's past to surface, even indirectly, it marks a quiet turn. Her action opens a path between concealment and connection. Some thinkers speak of this as narrative repair, the effort to live with the past by naming it. The grandmother does not fully explain, but she lets enough be known. This small gesture is a form of care. It lets both her and Martha move toward trust again. Truth, spoken carefully, creates room for healing. It does not erase the hurt, but it allows them to live beside it, with less fear and more recognition.

Temsula Ao's feminist vision in The Three Women is not programmatic or overtly polemical; rather, it is reflective and nuanced. Each woman's journey involves an ongoing ethical negotiation between personal agency, social expectation, and moral responsibility. Ao's characters do not arrive at fixed identities; instead, they engage in what can be called ethical self-formation, a process of becoming shaped by care, reflection, and accountability. This ethical dimension challenges essentialist or biologically deterministic views of womanhood and foregrounds relationality and moral complexity.

Taylor's assertion that to have an identity is "to be able to answer the question: Where do I stand?" (Taylor 27) captures the moral thread running through Ao's narrative. Martha, Medemla, and the grandmother each face this question in their own way, moving through betrayal, silence, and slow acts of healing. Their moral paths are distinct but converge in a shared search for dignity and moral grounding. In

this sense, identity is not simply something one has. It is something one lives. It involves choices, values, and responsibilities shaped by experience.

"The Three Women" is not only a story of personal change but also a reflection on the ethics of selfhood, family, and womanhood. Through the quiet weight of adoption, loss, and care, Ao shows that identity is not inherited or imposed. It is asked, shaped, and lived into. The women's stories remind us that belonging is not only a return to one's roots. It is a moral act, a way of living truthfully with others, with memory, and with oneself.

4.5 Echoes of Self: Martha's Journey of Discovery and Acceptance

Temsula Ao's stories reflect deeply on the personal struggles people face when caught between the past and the present. In *Laburnum for My Head* and other stories, she explores what it means to lose a sense of home, to carry wounds passed down through generations, and to slowly make peace with who you are. One of her most unforgettable characters, Martha, lives through confusion and contradiction, yet her journey shows that healing begins when we stop resisting the complexity of our own lives. Through Martha, Ao offers a quiet but powerful reminder: self-understanding, no matter how difficult, is an act of courage.

Confronting Loss and Estrangement

Martha's story begins with a deep sense of loss and disconnection, from her family, her past, and parts of herself she doesn't yet understand. When she discovers that she isn't biologically related to her mother or grandmother, the news shakes her deeply. Ao doesn't turn this into a dramatic outburst; instead, she shows Martha's pain through small, honest moments. As Martha remembers, "Grandmother continued

sitting silently and I was growing restless with fear thinking that I would be sent back to my 'real' people and would never see my mother, grandmother or my new friends" (Ao 66). Her fear isn't just about her roots, but about losing the people who have become her world, the ones who raised her, loved her, and gave her a sense of feel belonging, though the truth was hidden. This moment captures not just Martha's fear of abandonment but also her deep-seated attachment to the community she considers her own. The fear here is not rooted in biology but in the loss of social and emotional bonds.

Philosopher Charles Taylor's theory of identity formation posits that identity is not a static or essentialist construct but is dialogical; it is shaped through our relationships and recognition from others (Taylor 25). Martha's fear of being sent away thus signals not merely a personal anxiety but the existential crisis of being denied recognition within the only context she has ever known. This dialogical identity is further tested as Martha begins to process her mother and grandmother's concealment of the truth. Despite her resentment, she acknowledges their enduring love: "But I kept on asking myself: why had they not told me the truth?" (Ao 66).This moral tension between anger and understanding highlights Ao's refusal to offer clear moral binaries. Instead, she presents ethical value as a process of learning to inhabit contradictory emotions.

Ethics of Acceptance and Recognition

Martha's development lies in her ethical growth, her capacity to forgive, to embrace contradiction, and to move toward wholeness. This is poignantly captured when she reaches out to Ao, calling her "your real mother" (Ao 72). This act of mutual recognition marks a pivotal moment of ethical reconciliation, not only between

individuals but within Martha's fragmented sense of self. In this gesture, Ao and Martha enact what Paul Ricoeur calls narrative identity, the process by which individuals shape their identities by interpreting and integrating the stories of their lives, including moments of rupture, rejection, and return. Ricoeur contends that the ethical self is not one who denies pain, but one who learns to live with and through it (Ricoeur 114). Placed within the Naga context of postcolonial loss, disrupted kinship, and enduring spiritual frameworks, this reconciliation becomes more than personal. It speaks to a broader cultural ethic of healing, where identity is formed not through linear inheritance, but through acts of acceptance, relational repair, and spiritual acknowledgment. In Naga traditions, the self is inseparable from community, ancestry, and land; Martha's acceptance of Ao as her mother, despite years of silence and abandonment, reflects not weakness but a culturally resonant form of strength, one rooted in spiritual humility, intergenerational continuity, and the ethics of belonging.

Martha's acceptance is not portrayed as a resolution but as a turning point, an embrace of instability, rooted in love, memory, and moral growth. Ao does not idealise Martha's character; instead, she shows how the acceptance of imperfection can itself be a moral act. This rejection of finality aligns with Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity," where identity is understood as fluid, adaptable, and ethically contingent (Bauman 22).

The Collective Voice of Identity in Ao's Fiction

While Martha's journey focuses on personal identity, Temsüla Ao also explores the collective dimension of identity in her story The Boy Who Sold an Airfield. The protagonist, Pokenmong, is a tribal boy who, having fled home, performs menial

labor in the plains of Assam. Caught between displacement and survival, he finds himself emotionally and culturally unmoored: “Pokenmong was distracted by his worry about the future and went about the camp like one who did not know where he was” (Ao 48). His actions, culminating in the symbolic sale of an abandoned airfield, represent both a cunning survival strategy and a moral ambiguity born of disenfranchisement. “All that the villagers could do was hang their heads in shame and regret and curse the boy who had sold them an airfield” (Ao 53).

In contrast to Martha, Pokenmong’s identity crisis is shaped not by internal contradiction alone but by a broader historical alienation. His emotional detachment and ethical ambiguity reflect the deep fractures caused by colonialism and modernization in Naga society. Through this portrayal, Ao critiques the colonial legacy and its erasure of indigenous selfhood. The villagers’ helplessness reflects not just betrayal, but the deeper tragedy of a fragmented communal identity, one that no longer recognizes or protects its own. Frantz Fanon’s theory of colonial identity formation is relevant here. Fanon argues that colonialism not only exploits but also distorts native self-perception, generating internalized inferiority, cultural confusion, and dislocation from tradition (Fanon 18).

Pokenmong’s crisis reflects the isolation many colonised Naga youth feel. He is separated from the traditions he was meant to have, yet he doesn’t fully belong in the place that now dominates his world. His experience shows the emotional and cultural struggle of a generation marked by the wounds of colonisation and in a postcolonial society. Like many others, Pokenmong finds himself caught between two ways of life. He has grown distant from the knowledge and values of his ancestors, but the

settler and the state do not offer him a real place either. He lives in a space where belonging is uncertain, and identity feels unfinished.

Ao doesn't judge Pokenmong for his choices. Like Martha, he is shaped by the history and circumstances around him, doing his best to find meaning and a sense of control in a world that often leaves him on the margins. Even though their lives are very different, both characters face a similar struggle, to understand who they are in the middle of loss, confusion, and change. By placing their stories alongside each other, Ao reminds us that identity, especially in the postcolonial Naga context, is never built alone. It grows out of a long conversation with memory, tradition, and the pain carried across generations.

Naga Identity and the Ethics of Belonging

Temsula Ao's writing explores what it means to be Naga in a world that is constantly changing. She shows how identity is often caught between the traditions of rural life and the demands of the modern city. Her stories reveal how the colonial past interrupted the flow of history and created a need to rediscover who we are. Through her work, she helps keep memories alive and gives voice to a past that many try to forget.

Ao often places personal experiences within larger social and historical settings. This makes her stories feel real and rooted. For her, remembering is not about longing for the past. It is about healing and rebuilding. Memory, in her view, helps people shape their identities through honesty, care, and connection with others.

In *Laburnum for My Head* and other stories, Ao shows that identity is not simple or final. Martha slowly makes peace with her origins, while Pokenmong struggles to survive in a world that does not offer easy choices. Through these characters, Ao

reminds us that identity is something we live through. It grows out of our actions, our relationships, and our histories. She invites us to see identity not as something fixed, but as something we create by how we choose to live.

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CHAPTER FIVE

EASTERINE KIRE AND TEMSULA AO: EPITOMES OF NAGA TRADITION AND MORALITY

5.1 Authors and Their Literary Creations: Epitomes of Cultural Values and Identity

Writing from Nagaland has rarely appeared in mainstream Indian English literature. Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have brought attention to this region through their work. Their stories show the history and experiences of their communities. They explore how people remember the past and how those memories affect the present. Temsula Ao's short story "The Curfew Man" tells a forgotten story of life under military curfew in Nagaland. It reveals how fear and surveillance changed daily life. Their writing also looks at simple moments like conversations and visits home. These moments reveal how identity and belonging grow over time and through relationships. Their work does not speak for all of Nagaland. Instead, it opens a way for voices that are often ignored. Their literature keeps important stories alive. These stories matter not because they are attention-grabbing but because they are real.

Both Kire and Ao base their work on oral traditions, collective memory, and indigenous belief systems. They portray culture not as something unchanging from the past but as something active and shaped over time. They explore how modern life and conflict shape Naga identity. Their work places the Naga perspective within the broader field of postcolonial studies while keeping its distinct local character. Through fiction, poetry, and oral stories, Kire and Ao challenge official narratives

and government portrayals that have often simplified or erased tribal identities in India's northeast.

5.2 The Context of Naga Identity and Indigenous Storytelling

Naga identity grows from both tradition and change. It is shaped by many years of oral stories, ancestral customs, and shared community life, while carrying the effects of colonial rule, missionary influence, and political struggles after India's independence. For the Nagas, storytelling is not merely a cultural practice. It is a vital means of preserving values, rules for living, and a shared sense of who they are. Stories hold their laws, social rules, and ethics. When writers like Kire and Ao put these stories into writing, they show how this tradition continues to adapt and endure. Temsula Ao writes about Naga life through poetry and short stories. In collections such as *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, she blends memory, history, and community experience. Her work draws on oral tradition but also speaks to present struggles. Many of her characters face tensions between older customs and modern change. Through them, Ao reflects the challenges that affect many Indigenous groups today. Her writing shows care for the spiritual and emotional world of her people. She also raises concerns about the social and political forces that continue to threaten Naga ways of living.

Easterine Kire writes from within the cultural and moral world of her community. Her novels, including *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari*, and *When the River Sleeps*, reflect different periods in Naga history. These range from the colonial era to the time of political unrest and into more recent concerns with faith and meaning. Her main characters often make difficult choices, guided by local values rather than

outside rules. Her writing style is calm and reflective, echoing the patterns of oral storytelling. Through her stories, Kire shows how Naga identity remains closely connected to land, memory, and spiritual life.

Both authors pay close attention to how gender shapes Naga identity. In many parts of Naga society, women's voices have been left out of public memory. Ao and Kire respond to this by placing female experiences at the centre of their work. These are not side stories. They are central to how the community understands culture and ethics. Their writing challenges the idea that tribal women only carry tradition. The women in their narratives take active roles. They pass on knowledge, make decisions, and help guide the life of the community. In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire draws from a young girl's point of view to show how gender roles are introduced early. Dielieno recalls, "That portion is always for boys. Girls must eat the other portions" (Kire 1), after being denied a chicken leg by her grandmother. Later, she says, "I sometimes felt I was an afterthought, and maybe Father and Mother didn't quite know what to do with me" (Kire 2). These moments are quiet and personal. They show how gender becomes part of daily life. Through such details, Kire reveals how identity is shaped by family roles, small decisions, and what is remembered or left unsaid.

Kire and Ao write from the everyday realities of Naga life: its stories, customs, and struggles. Their work pushes back against the ways the Northeast is often misunderstood or ignored in writing about India. They focus on local ways of speaking, remembering, and living that do not fit into common ideas shaped elsewhere. The region is often treated as distant or less important, but their writing

refuses that position. They are not looking for approval from outside. They write with clarity and purpose, grounded in the places and people they know.

For Kire and Ao, remembering the past paves the way to speak honestly about lives marked by conflict, loss, and being pushed to the margins. Their writing brings forward experiences that are often left out of public conversations, yet it does so with strength and clarity. These are not accounts of defeat, but of survival, pride, and quiet determination. In *Once Upon a Life,* Ao writes, "I can now look at myself without any shame or apology because I have fought the odds with the truth and integrity of my inner self… I am sure that when my children read this, they will be able to say, 'we understand you, mother'" (Ao 231). Her words offer not only a personal truth but a connection across generations.

The stories told by Kire and Ao do not follow the usual lines drawn between past and future, or between what is considered traditional and what is seen as modern. They show how identity shifts and adapts, shaped by outside pressures but also by choices made within families and communities.

Kire and Ao are not only storytellers. They hold onto what others have often overlooked, and they offer ways of living that draw from shared beliefs, care for others, and deep respect for where they come from. Their work does not just describe Naga life, it takes part in how that life continues to grow and define itself.

5.3 Easterine Kire: Voice of Remembrance and Cultural Affirmation

Easterine Kire, the first Naga novelist to write in English, holds a unique place in Indian English literature. Her fiction goes beyond simple writing to act as a way of recording and reflecting on cultural history. Through novels such as *Mari* (2010*),*

Bitter Wormwood (2011), and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), Kire has developed a sustained literary effort aimed at preserving, exploring, and affirming Naga identity, history, and perspective. Her work challenges common portrayals of the Northeast as either a remote political borderland or a simplified tribal region. Instead, she offers a careful and thoughtful representation rooted in collective memory, ethical reflection, and living spiritual traditions.

Central to Kire's narrative approach is a strong commitment to remembrance, a deliberate act of cultural and historical recall that resists suppression. In *A Naga Village Remembered*, Kire reconstructs the battle of Khonoma (1879–1880); one of the earliest acts of Naga resistance against British colonial expansion. The novel departs from colonial accounts of the event, offering instead an indigenous perspective in which the village, not the empire, occupies narrative centrality. Through the protagonist, and other village defenders, Kire renders the ethical stakes of resistance: loyalty, honor, and the communal imperative to protect ancestral land. The Khonoma resistance becomes more than a historical event; it is reanimated as a moral tale whose values reverberate in the cultural memory of subsequent generations. As Kire writes, "In defending their village, the warriors were also defending a way of life" (Kire 89). This emphasis on ethical inheritance illustrates how memory functions as both resistance and moral pedagogy.

Kire's fiction also serves as an ethical archive, bearing witness to the psychological and social scars left by political violence in Nagaland. *Bitter Wormwood* marks a significant narrative shift by focusing on the personal experiences shaped by the Naga resistance for sovereignty and the prolonged insurgency that followed. The novel's protagonist, Mose, becomes a lens through which Kire explores the personal

consequences of political commitment. Initially driven by youthful idealism, Mose joins the underground movement, but his later years are marked by regret, trauma, and emotional estrangement. Kire avoids portraying him as either a hero or a traitor. Instead, she reveals the emotional complexity and internal conflict that political violence can generate. Through a linear yet emotionally layered narrative structure that moves between past and present, Kire allows the reader to trace how memories of loss, disillusionment, and compassion shape Mose's moral outlook. This structure underscores how ethical values, such as empathy, resilience, and responsibility, are preserved not through grand political ideologies but through everyday choices and human relationships. Memory in *Bitter Wormwood* is not simply a historical record but a moral force, one that helps reclaim dignity amid fragmentation. As the novel poignantly asks, "How does one carry on when everything that gave your life meaning has been turned to dust?" (Kire 142). Kire's answer lies in the enduring strength of oral memory, the quiet acts of care within families and communities, and the courage to live meaningfully despite unhealed wounds.

Kire's deep engagement with Naga cosmology and spirituality finds its most profound expression in *When the River Sleeps*, a novel that marks a shift from historical realism to a more allegorical and myth-infused narrative mode. The protagonist, Vilie undertakes a solitary journey to find a mythical river said to grant dreams when found in its slumber. This quest is less about physical triumph and more about spiritual attunement: to the rhythms of the forest, the voices of spirits, and the ethical teachings embedded in indigenous ways of life. Unlike traditional hero stories focused on conquest or change, Vilie's journey is about tuning in,

listening to the land's rhythms, hearing the voices of the spirit world, and understanding the ethical wisdom woven into indigenous beliefs.

One key moment that reveals Vilie's ethical values is when he chooses to spare a predatory spirit-woman instead of killing her. Although she threatens him, Vilie sees her suffering and shows mercy. His decision comes from an inner sense of morality shaped by cultural belief. This act of compassion shows a deeper insight, that all beings, even those who seem dangerous, live within a shared network of life and consequence. Through such moments, Kire highlights the intellectual and spiritual depth of Naga animism. This belief system is often misunderstood or reduced to myth in dominant accounts. In the novel, the forest is not just a setting. It is a living moral presence. Vilie reflects that the forest never forgets and is wiser and more forgiving than people. In this view, nature responds to intention. It is a moral force. Kire challenges human-centered views of morality and presents an ethic based on humility, respect, and care for all life.

The novel follows Vilie, a solitary hunter and seeker. His journey through the forest is both moral and spiritual. He is not searching for wealth or power. He longs for peace, clarity, and spiritual strength that are rooted in ancestral knowledge. Throughout the novel, moral life is not shown as a set of rules. It is shaped by dreams, signs from nature, and the quiet lessons of inherited wisdom. Vilie shows kindness and restraint. Even when provoked, he chooses not to harm others. His actions reflect a way of life where morality is practiced, not preached. His deep connection with the land is part of this. As he often says, "The forest is my wife" (Kire 7). This statement shows his respect for the forest. He sees it as a partner in his life, not a resource to control.

Kire presents a view of morality that is close and personal, not grand or heroic. Vilie's daily actions are part of a spiritual practice. His solitude is not isolation. It is a time to listen: to his dreams, to animals, and to the memory of his ancestors. He is advised, "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 31). This warning redefines the nature of danger, suggesting that threats are not always physical. It implies that certain forms of conflict require ethical discernment rather than armed resistance.

Vilie's openness to the forest changes him. After finding the heart-stone, he asks, "Was that why it was called the heart-stone? It seemed to have the power to transform the heart" (Kire 139). This moment shows a deeper kind of learning. His growth is not forced from the outside. It comes from within. In this way, listening becomes an ethical act. It is informed by a Naga worldview, where land, spirit, and memory are joined. By showing animism as meaningful and coherent, Kire pushes back against colonial ideas that dismiss it as mere superstition.

Postcolonial literature frequently turns to questions of resistance and collective identity formation. However, Easterine Kire's fiction moves away from these concerns, focusing instead on the lived realities of Naga communities. Her narratives do not attempt to speak for a unified culture or engage in political idealism. Instead, they present a careful portrayal of Naga life, attentive to memory, belief, and custom. Her characters move through moral frameworks shaped by oral history, cultural memory, and spiritual understanding. Through this approach, Kire presents Naga cultural experience as complex and evolving, offering a form of strength that is both

individual and shared. Her work avoids oversimplified representations by attending closely to the cultural practices and relationships that shape her characters' world.

Moreover, the way Kire writes supports the concerns at the heart of her work. Her prose is restrained but rich in feeling, shaped by the rhythms of spoken storytelling. This approach reflects the narrative forms passed down through generations in Naga communities, strengthening the link between spoken word and written text. Her novels, then, do more than tell stories; they carry memory, offer testimony, and pass on ways of seeing and understanding the world.

Easterine Kire's fiction serves two important purposes. It brings forgotten or ignored parts of Naga history into focus, giving voice to stories that have often been left out. It also affirms a moral world shaped by relationships, spiritual understanding, and forms of knowledge passed through generations. Her work challenges the neglect of Naga experience in wider cultural narratives, and it insists on the truth and value of the lives she writes about. Through her novels, Kire contributes not only to literature as an art form, but also to the effort to protect cultural memory and renew ethical commitments.

5.4 Temsula Ao : The Poet-Elder and Custodian of Memory

Temsula Ao holds a distinct and influential place in the expanding field of Naga literature in English. As a poet, short story writer, folklorist, and cultural commentator, her creative vision is shaped by the lived histories and social realities of the Naga people. Her poetry collections, *Songs That Tell* and *Songs from the Other Life*, and her short story volumes *These Hills Called Home*, *Laburnum for My Head* and *Once Upon a Life* are not only literary achievements but also acts of

remembrance that engage with questions of memory and cultural survival. In a context where Naga voices have often been excluded or misrepresented by dominant Indian narratives, Ao's work offers a clear and necessary response. Her writing preserves memory, challenges imposed images, and speaks with insight rooted in the histories it seeks to honour.

Temsula Ao's writing reflects a deep commitment to preserving and sharing the stories of the Naga people. As a poet and elder, she serves both as a witness to her community's experiences and as a guardian of its cultural memory. Her work explores the spiritual and ethical dimensions of Naga life, especially as it responds to the challenges of change and continuity. Instead of simply recording what has been lost, Ao seeks to revive what is at risk of disappearing and to keep it alive within the collective memory.

For Ao, remembering is not a passive or nostalgic act but an active form of resistance against cultural loss and pressures to conform. Her poetry carries a tone of elegy while also functioning as a means of sustaining indigenous knowledge threatened by rapid social transformations, militarisation, and political violence.

Moreover, Ao's work gives voice to histories that have often been silenced or ignored in dominant narratives. The figure of the poet-elder in her writing is not distant or abstract but present and engaged, speaking from within the community's lived realities. By bridging oral traditions, gendered experiences, and written literature, she establishes a unique authority in her work.

Her literary project is both deeply personal and inherently political, highlighting the continuing importance of indigenous narratives in shaping new understandings of identity, ethics, and belonging.

Dignity, Voice, and the Morality of Memory in Temsula Ao's

Once Upon a Life

Temsula Ao's *Once Upon a Life: Burnt Curry and Bloody Rags* moves away from fiction and into a deeply personal account of loss, survival, and the quiet strength found in remembering. Unlike her short stories, which often reflect shared histories and community trauma, this memoir focuses on her own childhood, on being abandoned, placed in institutional care, and growing up with questions that were rarely answered. She does not present herself as a victim. Instead, she writes to reclaim her story and to speak with honesty about what it means to survive. The voice that emerges is steady and clear, grounded in experience and committed to truth.

In telling her story, Ao does more than remember. She opens a space for understanding pain without bitterness, and for speaking of past wounds without turning them into spectacle. "I can now look at myself without any shame or apology because I have fought the odds with the truth and integrity of my inner self… I am sure that when my children read this, they will be able to say, 'we understand you, mother'" (Ao 231). Here, the act of remembering becomes a form of care, both for her and for those who come after. It is not just about looking back but about passing something forward, something honest, resilient, and deeply human.

Narrative Fiction and the Ethics of Storytelling

Temsula Ao's move into short fiction, especially in collections like *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head*, marks a thoughtful broadening of her creative work. Her poetry often turns to compressed imagery and lyrical form, but her fiction creates space for lives to unfold slowly and with greater emotional depth.

Through these stories, she explores how individuals live through collective pain, focusing on small but charged experiences that speak to deeper histories of violence and displacement. Her attention rests not only on events themselves but on how they linger in a daily life.

What makes her fiction so affecting is its quiet emotional force. Ao does not rely on spectacle or dramatic incident. Her stories remain grounded in the lives of those often left out of public narratives, women, elders, children, and those caught in difficult moral situations. These characters are written with care and emotional clarity. They are shaped by their relationships, their surroundings, and the pressures of history. Through them, Ao reveals how memory persists in subtle ways, and how people continue even when faced with silence, fear, and loss.

A powerful example of this quiet strength appears in "The Last Song," one of the most moving stories in *These Hills Called Home*. It tells of Apenyo, a woman sentenced to death, who chooses to meet the moment not with fear or silence, but with song. As violence breaks out, "some members of the choir left their singing and were seen trying to run away to safety, only Apenyo stood her ground. She sang on, oblivious of the situation as if an unseen presence was guiding her" (Ao 27). Her singing becomes an expression of resolve, memory, and inner freedom. In that moment, voice becomes the only form of resistance left to her, and she uses it with grace and clarity. The song does not plead; it refuses. Ao's use of song here recalls its role in her poetry, where it often serves as a vessel for memory and endurance. Through Apenyo's final gesture, death is refigured, not as silence, but as a moment where something deeply human is affirmed. In singing, she claims her voice one last time, and in doing so, leaves behind not just sound, but meaning.

Throughout her fiction, Temsula Ao resists placing her characters into fixed categories. She does not present them as simply victims or perpetrators, traditional or modern, passive or defiant. Instead, she draws attention to the complicated situations her characters face, where choices are shaped by fear, obligation, and the desire to survive. These are not stories built on straightforward moral divisions, but often under pressure and without clear answers. Ao's commitment to this emotional and ethical complexity encourages the reader to engage more deeply with the lived realities her work brings into focus.

Her stories are not only about what happens, but about how individuals carry memory, responsibility, and cultural knowledge through difficult times. Ao listens closely to the conditions that shape her people, allowing them to speak in their own way. This approach gives her fiction a quiet strength, reminding us that even in times of upheaval, lives are shaped by care, thought, and a deeply felt sense of connection.

Her stories thus offer an alternative to official histories and draw readers into a more attentive understanding of life in Northeast India. Through emotionally resonant, politically engaged, and ethically reflective fiction, Ao continues her work as a cultural guardian through storytelling, using narrative as both testimony and a transformation.

Women as Moral Anchors

Temsula Ao's literary vision places women at the moral core of Naga society, portraying them not as peripheral or secondary characters but as vital agents of ethical clarity and cultural continuity. They are not treated as marginal figures, but as people whose choices and responsibilities shape the moral life of their communities. These women do not resist through protest or overt confrontation. Instead, their

strength comes through memory, care, and the quiet persistence of doing what is right. Their actions may seem small, but they carry weight. Through them, Ao offers a way of thinking about strength and responsibility that is attentive to the social and cultural world they inhabit.

Ao's women are not portrayed as helpless or silent figures. They are thoughtful and quietly determined, often responding to loss and tradition in ways that are deeply personal. In *Laburnum for My Head*, the woman at the heart of the story, Lentina, knows that her time is drawing to a close. Yet she does not turn to fear or despair. Instead, she chooses to plant laburnum trees at the place where she wants to be laid to rest. The act is quiet but deeply felt an expression of her wish to shape how she will be remembered. Lentina "never gave up on her hope of having a full-grown laburnum tree in her garden some day" (Ao 14) and this hope carries through into her final decisions. The tree is not just a plant to her; it becomes a way of staying connected to the world through beauty, care, and a life that will outlast her. In planting it, she claims something gentle yet powerful and to leave something behind that speaks in her voice

In "The Last Song", Temsula Ao recounts the story of Apenyo, a young woman who endures torture and sexual violence during a military crackdown. In the final moments before her execution, she begins to sing a traditional Naga song. She does not plead or cry out. Instead, she turns inward, reaching for something that cannot be taken from her, her voice, her memory, and the cultural rhythm that shaped her. This act becomes a form of moral resistance as it affirms her presence and her sense of self in the face of an effort to erase both. Her singing is not simply a farewell but a declaration of worth. As the old storyteller says, "You do not know about Apenyo?

Then come and listen carefully…" (Ao 33) Through this act of telling, Ao preserves not only Apenyo's story but her refusal to be silenced.

Like Temsula Ao's women, Easterine Kire's female characters in *A Terrible Matriarchy* quietly hold together the emotional and moral centre of their families. Lieno's mother offers one of the clearest examples. She responds not with anger or resistance, but with a thoughtful sense of care when she sees how gender expectations affect her daughter. Instead of blaming or defending, she reflects on her mother-in-law's fears and gently helps Lieno understand the context behind her grandmother's behaviour. Her words, "That may be true but for your father and I, it is you, our daughter, who has brought us the greatest comfort. We love all of you equally. You must always know that," (Kire 273) carries quiet assurance and challenge old hierarchies without conflict. When she later adds, "we cannot buy love; we can only hope," (273) she reveals a capacity for emotional clarity and maturity. In this reflective role, Lieno's mother becomes a source of strength, not through grand gestures, but through everyday acts of understanding, fairness, and emotional depth.

The choices these women make are not dramatic, but they are deeply moral. When they plant a tree, sing in the face of violence, or carry on with quiet endurance, they show that strength does not always need to be loud. In Temsula Ao's stories, women hold on to their cultural roots, but also find ways to reshape them so that dignity and survival can go hand in hand. Their strength comes through care, memory, and a steady attention to those around them. They do not lead revolutions, but they become the ones who carry their communities through pain, change, and uncertainty.

By placing women at the heart of her stories, Ao shows how important they are in holding things together. Their actions may seem ordinary, but they carry the weight

of memory and the work of care. As a result, Ao gives her stories emotional honesty and depth, showing how life is carried forward not just through events, but through the way it is lived.

Easterine Kire's women reflect a similar quiet strength. In A *Terrible Matriarchy*, Lieno's mother brings clarity and comfort to her daughter, without bitterness or resentment. She understands the pressures passed down from older generations, and instead of passing them on, she chooses understanding. Her kindness becomes a guide for her daughter, offering a way to live with both compassion and strength. Kire's women, like Ao's, don't resist with noise, but with care, clarity, and a firm sense of what matters.

Together, these stories remind us that moral strength often lies in the quiet acts: in listening, remembering, and standing by others. The women in Ao's and Kire's fiction show that even in difficult times, it is this steady presence that helps hold a world together.

Literature as Cultural Testimony and Ethical Inquiry

Temsula Ao's writing is a powerful form of witness. Her fiction and poetry hold the stories, struggles, and voices of the Naga people, reflecting both their strength and the pain they have endured across generations. In a national context where indigenous perspectives are often overlooked or erased, Ao brings forward those who have remained unheard.

Ao offers testimony through vivid portrayals of life in Naga communities shaped by violence, colonial rule, and political unrest. Her stories often draw from oral tradition, yet they are never romantic. She respects cultural practices, pointing to moments where those practices may limit or harm, especially in matters of gender

and authority. *In These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*, Ao shows how years of military presence in Northeast India have left emotional and psychological wounds. These stories are not driven by political slogans. Instead, they encourage readers to think carefully about the long shadows left by trauma, silence, and the act of remembering.

In this way, Ao treats literature as something with moral weight. Her work asks readers not just to understand the past, but to reflect on how that past is told, who gets to speak, and what remains hidden. Storytelling, for Ao, is never neutral. It is shaped by personal experience and shared history. Her characters often wrestle with silence, not as emptiness, but as something filled with fear, loyalty, pain, and choice. Speaking out, or remaining silent, becomes a serious decision with lasting effects.

Ao's stories serve a dual purpose: they keep cultural knowledge alive and ask difficult moral questions. She does not describe what happened but she challenges readers to consider how those events still shape lives today. Her focus on ordinary individuals shows how literature can hold both memory and responsibility. By doing this, she creates stories that are politically aware and ask for attention, care, and accountability from both writer and reader. Through her work, Ao shows that literature can be a form of listening, of honoring those who speak, and those who cannot.

Temsula Ao's stories questions justice, reconciliation, and what it means to belong. She writes about wounds carried by entire communities. Through these narratives, she opens up a way for readers to think about how societies remember, mourn, and move forward after conflict. In this sense, her work shares concerns with figures like Walter Benjamin, who saw storytelling as a way of holding onto memory when

history threatens to forget. Her approach also gives Indigenous scholars who see storytelling as essential to recovery in the wake of colonial disruption.Ao's writing treats literature as a record of cultural life as it becomes a way of working through unresolved tensions, between past and present, silence and expression, tradition and change. Her thoughtful way is what makes her stand to encourage reflection without turning nostalgia into idealisation.

Her characters often live at the intersection of what has been handed down and what is being reshaped around them. Their inner conflicts make visible the moral uncertainties that come with transition. Through them, Ao raises pressing questions like, how do people carry pain without letting it define them? Can remembering be a form of healing rather than captivity? And what role does storytelling play in helping a culture remain honest while also imagining new ways to live?

Reclaiming Narrative Sovereignty

In the postcolonial Indian context, the act of storytelling becomes inherently political. Temsula Ao reclaims narrative sovereignty as a form of cultural resistance and not just a literary strategy. Her writings are mostly about Naga's experiences, oral traditions, Indigenous testimony that have historically erased or misrepresented her people. As a result, Ao transforms literature into a record that preserves Naga memory and also rewrites its place within India's postcolonial discourse.

Ao's choice to write in English might initially seem at odds with her decolonial aims. However, this choice is neither accidental nor assimilative but is a conscious act of reclamation. In Ao's hands, English becomes a tool of narrative empowerment but of assertion. She reshapes it by turning it into a medium that carries Indigenous voice and memory. This process destabilises colonial and linguistic hierarchies, creating a

hybrid literary idiom that addresses global readers while remaining rooted in cultural specificity.

In reworking the coloniser's language, Ao performs a double intervention. First, she brings histories and values of a people. Secondly, by contrasting the truths found in indigenous testimony with the narratives sanctioned by the state. She challenges the power structures that determine whose voices are heard and whose are silenced. Her use of English is a strategic choice to reach wider audiences without surrendering narrative authority. The stories she tells are the language that is reshaped by the stories. This inversion of linguistic power is central to the decolonial force of her work.

Temsula Ao's narrative style moves beyond language choice and extends into the way she frames her stories. Instead of presenting events in a straight line with a clear end, she allows her narratives to move between moments, drawing attention back to key incidents or questions. This method reflects the oral traditions of her community, where stories unfold through rhythm, repetition, and shared understanding. Her writing does not just report what happened, it draws readers into the process of understanding how people carry the past with them.

By using this form, Ao contributes to broader efforts to preserve cultural knowledge in the face of historical neglect. She offers a mode of storytelling that continues through voices, conversations, and generational sharing, rather than through official documentation. In her work, telling a story is a way to stay connected to people, place, and the values that continue to shape ordinary life.

Mainstream histories have often excluded the kind of detail and perspective Ao brings into focus. She writes from within her own cultural context, drawing on

observation, lived experience, and community understanding. In this, her work finds a meaningful parallel with Easterine Kire's. Though each writer has a distinct style, both use literature to speak from within, not about, their world. Together, they show how storytelling can raise important questions about how identities are formed, how they persist, and how they continue to change.

5.5 Conclusion: Literature as Moral Cartography

Temsula Ao is not just a storyteller. She shows the moral world of Naga society through simple and powerful words. Her writing does more than tell stories. It helps readers understand how people remember, suffer, survive, and hold on to what matters. Her work shows that literature is not only about culture. It is also about how people think about right and wrong, and how they stay together through hard times.

Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao have changed Indian literature. They bring attention to the Northeast, a region often forgotten or misunderstood. Their work is now part of university courses. It inspires young writers. It gives strength to people whose stories were not heard before. Their writing speaks from inside their communities. It does not try to follow outside views. It tells what is true and important from their experience.

Kire's writing shows people who think deeply and live with care. Her characters often live quiet lives. They remember their past and respect the land. They follow values passed down by their families. They do not follow rules from others. They follow what they have learned through love, faith, and memory. Whereas, Ao's stories begin with pain; she writes about loss, struggle, and the silence around women's lives. But her stories do not ask for pity. Her characters are strong. They

speak the truth and live with dignity. Ao's language is clear and calm. Her stories show that memory is not just personal. It belongs to everyone.

Both writers show that morality grows from within the community. It does not come from rules outside. Their stories stay close to real life. They do not try to fit into larger ideas. They speak from their own places and beliefs. They ask readers to listen and learn with respect.Their stories draw a kind of map. This map shows how people live, believe, and make choices. The stories do not give simple answers. They give space for thought. They ask readers to be patient and to see the truth in everyday life. Through their words, literature becomes a way to protect the values that help people live together.

The worlds in their stories are not perfect. They are shaped by pain and quiet strength. But they are real. Kire and Ao give us more than stories. They give us a way to see, to care, and to remember what matters.

As Temsula Ao herself says,

"I feel that this is the most important ingredient in any writing: that literature be relevant to life" (Ao 225).

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

6.1 Critical Interpretation of Chapters

This thesis has undertaken not just a textual reading but an interpretive excavation of the moral and ethical architectures within Naga literature, with Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao serving as its primary interlocutors. The chapters together demonstrate that moral enquiry in this literary tradition is not a decorative element of narrative but a structuring principle, informed by historical pressures, gendered experience, and the resilience of oral tradition. The intellectual movement across chapters reflects a deliberate shift from ethnographic grounding to theoretical framing, from single-author textual analysis to comparative synthesis, and finally to broader ethical propositions for indigenous modernity.

The General Introduction does more than set the stage; it addresses the politics of representation by placing the Nagas within a contested historical and anthropological space. By excavating the origins and migration narratives of the Nagas, and problematising the term *'Naga'*, the chapter resists essentialist readings and recognises the mutable, constructed nature of identity. Its engagement with oral traditions as moral repositories is not antiquarian nostalgia but an assertion of epistemic legitimacy, placing indigenous narrative practices on equal footing with written literary canons. By embedding the research problem within ongoing debates on Naga identity, gender, and memory, the introduction aligns the study with

postcolonial, feminist, and indigenous studies frameworks, making it methodologically self-conscious and politically alert.

Chapter Two develops an interpretive framework that refuses rigid theoretical templates, instead favouring a dialogic relationship between indigenous ethics and critical theory. This is significant because it acknowledges that Naga moral consciousness is not an inert cultural inheritance but an evolving interpretive act. The chapter's conceptual elasticity allows it to trace the movement of values through landscapes of trauma, land dispossession, and shifting kinship structures. The incorporation of the *morung*, not merely as a cultural artefact but as an ethical pedagogy, reclaims its intellectual agency in the moral education of the community. This framework does not just analyse literature; it legitimises it as a living philosophical discourse capable of shaping and being shaped by socio-political realities.

Chapter Three interprets Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* and *Bitter Wormwood* not simply as historical or political narratives but as moral laboratories where ethical dilemmas are tested against lived history. In *A Naga Village Remembered*, the reconstruction of Khonoma's resistance to British colonialism becomes a meditation on collective morality under duress, revealing how ethical codes adapt when confronted by existential threat. *Bitter Wormwood* turns the gaze inward, charting the psychological landscapes of insurgency, where loyalty, justice, and personal peace pull against each other. Here, Kire's narrative polyphony resists moral absolutism, insisting on the legitimacy of conflicting truths, a strategy that destabilises colonial and nationalist master-narratives alike.

Chapter Four interprets Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and *Laburnum for My Head* as meditations on moral agency in contexts where violence, loss, and silence shape ethical possibility. In *These Hills Called Home*, moral reflection is born out of trauma, but Ao resists the seduction of cathartic closure, forcing the reader to inhabit the aftermath of decision-making. In *Laburnum for My Head*, the focus shifts to seemingly minor acts, planting a tree, recalling a personal history, which accrue moral weight through persistence and intention. Ao's preference for slow, deliberate character development mirrors the process of moral reasoning itself, privileging reflection over resolution. Her narratives foreground a feminine ethical register that is understated yet transformative, challenging both patriarchal tradition and militarised nationalism.

Chapter Five is not a mere juxtaposition of two authors but a critical synthesis that reveals how their differing narrative strategies coalesce into a shared moral project. Kire's historical sweep and community-centred narratives contrast with Ao's intimate, character-driven moral inquiries, yet both challenge inherited authority structures and question the ethical viability of certain traditions. The comparative lens exposes how gender operates differently in each oeuvre, Kire integrating male and female moral trajectories into a communal whole, Ao centring female agency as a site of moral resistance. This chapter positions both authors as cultural theorists as much as creative writers, whose works engage in decolonising the moral imagination while also participating in global ethical discourse.

Thus, the movement across chapters reflects a coherent intellectual arc, from grounding Naga morality in cultural history, to articulating an adaptive theoretical framework, to examining individual authors' moral visions, and finally to integrating

those visions into a comparative discourse that challenges both internal cultural complacency and external misrepresentation.

6.2 Critical Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this thesis affirm that the moral and ethical concerns in the selected works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are not peripheral embellishments but the central organising principles of their creative worlds. Their fiction treats moral reasoning as an active, dynamic process embedded in cultural life; yet open to transformation under the pressure of history, social change, and personal experience. What emerges is a vision of literature that is not content with representing indigenous moral traditions but insists on testing them, stretching them, and, where necessary, reconstituting them. The ethical structures in their works are therefore both anchored and fluid, rooted in oral traditions, kinship codes, and communal narratives, yet constantly renegotiated in response to colonial intrusion, political upheaval, and the crosscurrents of modernity.

Colonialism, Christianity, and modernity figure in their fiction not as neutral historical markers but as agents of moral reconfiguration. The colonial dismantling of the morung, the weakening of customary law and the erosion of kinship-based ethics are presented as moments of profound dislocation. Yet neither writer succumbs to the temptation of uncritical nostalgia. They acknowledge the losses, diminished communal cohesion, the fading of intergenerational pedagogies, but they also recognise the spaces for ethical reinvention that such ruptures open. This ambivalence aligns closely with Homi Bhabha's theorisation of the "third space," a site of cultural negotiation where tradition and innovation do not cancel each other

but enter into dynamic interplay. Christianity, for instance, is not simply vilified as an alien imposition; in certain contexts, it is assimilated into Naga ethical thought, producing hybrid moral systems that can accommodate both biblical injunctions and indigenous codes of responsibility. The result is a moral landscape that is neither wholly traditional nor wholly modern, but an evolving synthesis that retains local agency.

The engagement with armed conflict and generational trauma in their works underscores the fundamentally context-bound nature of moral choice. In Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, the deployment of multiple narrative voices destabilises the idea of a singular moral authority, creating a polyphonic field in which competing truths coexist. This technique recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where meaning is produced through the interaction of different voices rather than imposed from above. The effect is to deny the reader the comfort of a single, authoritative ethical perspective; instead, the novel insists that moral decisions made in conditions of political violence are contingent, contested, and fraught with uncertainty. In Ao's fiction, by contrast, the moral view is trained on the intimate scale of human action, quiet gestures of care, acts of remembrance, the preservation of dignity in small, everyday ways. Here, the ethical force lies not in dramatic acts of resistance but in the steady accumulation of care and attentiveness, a sensibility that resonates with Carol Gilligan's "ethic of care," which privileges relationship, empathy, and responsiveness over abstract moral laws.

Both approaches dismantle binary moral frameworks that divide the world neatly into good and evil. In their place, they offer morally complex terrains where justice, loyalty, and survival are constantly in negotiation. This complexity is crucial in a

postcolonial setting, where the romanticisation of resistance can obscure the ethical compromises that survival often demands, and where collaboration can be motivated by more than simple self-interest. By resisting moral absolutism, both authors mirror the lived ethical realities of a society navigating between the imperatives of tradition and the demands of a turbulent present. In this sense, their work bears affinities with Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, which sees moral selfhood as an open, evolving project shaped by the story's individuals and communities talk about themselves. By leaving their narratives open-ended or multi-voiced, Kire and Ao allow moral identities to remain unfinished, capable of further growth and reinterpretation.

A striking feature of these findings is the centrality of gender as an organising principle in the moral universes of both writers. In Ao's stories, the moral agency of women is consistently foregrounded, not as a symbolic counterpoint to male heroism, but as an active force shaping the ethical life of the community. Her female characters often bear the double burden of patriarchal exclusion and political marginalisation, yet they emerge as moral anchors whose decisions are informed by both cultural memory and lived resilience. This enactment of agency aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of the subaltern voice, speaking not within the authorised boundaries of dominant discourse, but redefining those boundaries through action. Kire's treatment of gender differs in scope but not in significance; she integrates male and female moral trajectories into a communal ethic, suggesting that reconciliation and collective healing are only possible when both genders participate fully in the moral life of the community. This integration resists the

compartmentalisation of women's ethical roles and presents them as co-authors of communal morality rather than as its custodians on the margins.

The role of memory and oral tradition in their work is not limited to the preservation of cultural heritage; it is itself a moral practice. Storytelling becomes a form of ethical action, encoding lessons, transmitting values, and modelling moral reasoning for future generations. In their narrative techniques, shifts in voice, cyclical structures, embedded folktales, Kire and Ao replicate the rhythms and strategies of oral performance, collapsing the divide between spoken and written traditions. From an indigenous epistemological standpoint, this is an act of resistance against the historical devaluation of oral knowledge systems, reasserting their validity as vehicles of moral philosophy. Alasdair MacIntyre's argument that virtues are cultivated within the narrative traditions of a community is particularly relevant here: by embedding traditional stories within modern literary forms, these authors extend the narrative unity of Naga moral life into the present.

The political stakes of such moral storytelling are high. In reconstructing and reinterpreting moral codes through fiction, Kire and Ao challenge the authority of both state and nationalist narratives to define the ethical parameters of Naga existence. Their works function as counter-narratives in Bhabha's sense, interrupting dominant historiographies with alternative moral visions that complicate monolithic accounts of identity. In this way, they resist both the homogenising tendencies of the nation-state and the commodifying gaze of the global literary marketplace.

Perhaps most significantly, the findings reveal that while Kire's and Ao's works are deeply rooted in the specific histories and cultural contexts of Nagaland, they also speak to ethical concerns of universal resonance. The dilemmas they depict, whether

to remember or forget, to resist or accommodate, to remain loyal to one's people or to seek personal peace, are recognisable across cultures. This capacity to generate what Kwame Anthony Appiah terms "rooted cosmopolitanism" allows their work to contribute to a global moral vocabulary while retaining its distinctive local inflection. Rootedness comes from their fidelity to Naga moral frameworks; cosmopolitanism comes from their engagement with questions that transcend regional boundaries.

As a whole, the moral and ethical concerns in the works of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are inseparable from their narrative strategies, thematic preoccupations, and political commitments. Their fiction is not content to mirror the moral life of their society; it seeks to shape it, to offer models of ethical reasoning that are responsive to historical trauma, cultural change, and the uncertainties of the present. By placing indigenous moral thought in dialogue with feminist ethics, postcolonial theory, and narrative philosophy, they expand the moral vocabulary of Naga literature and secure its place within the global ethical and literary field. The most enduring finding of this thesis is that in their works, literature is not merely a repository of the past but a workshop for the moral futures of the community, a space where ethics is not only remembered but reimagined.

The course of this thesis reveals multiple fertile avenues for further scholarly exploration, each emerging organically from the critical insights gained in analysing Easterine Kire's and Temsula Ao's moral universes. One compelling direction lies in the comparative study of indigenous ethics, situating Naga moral philosophy alongside that of communities such as the Adivasi, Māori, Native American, and Sámi peoples. Such a framework would illuminate shared principles, communal responsibility, ecological reciprocity, and the pedagogical centrality of oral tradition,

while also mapping culturally specific divergences in the articulation of justice, care, and authority. This comparative lens could serve to liberate Naga ethics from the confines of a narrowly regional discourse, repositioning it as a vital participant in what Kwame Anthony Appiah has described as "rooted cosmopolitanism," a moral dialogue grounded in the particular yet conversant with the universal. In this way, the ethics emerging from Kire's and Ao's works could find resonances and productive tensions with other indigenous moral frameworks, thereby enlarging the global moral vocabulary.

Another rich field for inquiry emerges from the interdisciplinary potential of the ecological spirituality evident in both authors' narratives. Kire's frequent evocations of the land as a moral witness and Ao's interweaving of natural imagery with ethical reflection invite readings that intersect environmental humanities, eco-theology, and gender studies. The fragility of ecosystems in Northeast India mirrors the precarity of cultural ecosystems, and a cross-disciplinary engagement could yield models of moral reasoning that address both forms of vulnerability. This would align with the argument advanced by environmental philosophers that ethical thought must be ecologically situated, recognising human moral life as inseparable from the landscapes it inhabits. Such research would not only deepen our understanding of the environmental undercurrents in their fiction but also contribute to global debates on sustainability by offering indigenous perspectives that integrate ecological care with communal responsibility.

The pedagogical implications of Kire's and Ao's works are equally significant. Their narratives, with their intricate moral negotiations and cultural specificity, are ideally suited for integration into curricula designed to foster ethical literacy, gender

awareness, and intercultural competence. Future scholarship could focus on developing annotated editions, thematic teaching modules, and discussion-based pedagogies that align with what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls "decolonising methodologies," privileging local epistemologies and voices in educational spaces. Such initiatives would have a dual impact: they would indigenise literary education, ensuring that Naga moral thought is taught on its own terms, and they would broaden the ethical horizons of students by inviting them into dialogue with worldviews beyond the dominant cultural canon. In this way, the classroom becomes a continuation of the *morung* in a modern academic context, a communal space where moral inquiry is conducted through narrative exchange rather than rote moralising.

The reliance of both authors on oral tradition suggests another promising research trajectory in the form of community-based oral history projects. Extending the methods of this thesis into collaborative, field-based research could result in the systematic documentation and digital preservation of elders' narratives, folktales, and communal memories. Such work would not only safeguard these intangible heritages but also democratise knowledge production by making communities co-authors of their cultural archives. In Bhabha's terms, this would enact a form of "cultural translation" in which the act of recording oral histories does not freeze them into static texts but allows them to enter a living conversation with new audiences. Digitally archiving these materials could ensure that the moral knowledge encoded in them remains accessible to younger generations, thus maintaining the continuity of moral discourse across time and technological change.

Equally compelling is the question of translation and bilingual ethics. While Kire and Ao write primarily in English, their narratives are deeply shaped by the rhythms,

idioms, and conceptual structures of indigenous Naga languages. Investigating the ethics of translating oral traditions into global languages could interrogate questions of fidelity, representation, and linguistic sovereignty. As Lawrence Venuti and other translation theorists have argued, every act of translation involves a negotiation between domestication and foreignisation; in the context of Naga literature, this negotiation is further complicated by the historical power imbalances between English and indigenous languages. Future research might explore how moral meaning shifts, or resists shifting, across linguistic boundaries, and how translation can be practiced in ways that honour the ethical integrity of the source culture.

A final avenue for future scholarship involves critical biographical and dialogic studies of Kire and Ao. While this thesis has engaged closely with their thematic concerns, a sustained biographical inquiry, drawing on unpublished works, personal interviews, and archival materials, could trace the evolution of their aesthetic and ethical sensibilities over time. Such research could illuminate the deep entanglement of life, literature, and moral vision in their creative trajectories, revealing how personal histories intersect with collective memory to shape their narrative ethics.

Taken together, these directions for future research are not merely ancillary extensions of the present study; they are integral to the ongoing task of thinking with and through the moral visions articulated in Naga literature. They invite scholars to continue the work of comparative, interdisciplinary, and community-engaged inquiry, ensuring that the conversations initiated in these pages extend beyond the boundaries of the thesis itself.

In concluding, it is evident that Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao are not merely chroniclers of Naga experience; they are architects of a moral vision that transcends

temporal, cultural, and geographic boundaries. Their narratives hold in delicate balance the tensile pull between tradition and transformation, between the oral and the written, between personal grief and collective responsibility. They refuse the twin temptations of romanticising the past and surrendering to the volatility of the present, choosing instead to inhabit both temporalities with a discerning critical consciousness. This moral poise is visible in the ethical ambiguity of characters such as Mose in *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), whose unresolved struggle with nationalist memory refuses the closure of easy moral judgment. It is present in the understated yet profound act of planting a tree in *Laburnum for My Head* (2009), an act that becomes an ethical statement about continuity, memory, and resistance to erasure. It animates *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), which reclaims a collective act of anti-colonial resistance as a moral inheritance, and it shapes *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), which gives voice to those navigating the silent aftermath of violence.

By reimagining the pedagogical role of the *morung* through literature, Kire and Ao have created a contemporary space for moral instruction that is dialogic rather than didactic. In this reimagined *morung*, moral knowledge is not delivered as a fixed doctrine but emerges from the interplay of multiple voices, perspectives, and experiences. Their moral vision draws its authority from the land, from communal ties, and from intergenerational wisdom, not as static relics to be preserved behind glass but as adaptable, living principles capable of guiding action in the present. This adaptive quality is essential, for as MacIntyre reminds us, traditions remain alive only when they are subject to ongoing debate and reinterpretation; once they are

frozen, they become relics, incapable of shaping the moral lives of those who inherit them.

In an era marked by ecological crisis and ethical uncertainty, the works of Kire and Ao offer more than cultural testimony; they offer a blueprint for ethical renewal grounded in indigenous thought yet open to global dialogue. Their fiction demonstrates that moral knowledge is not an abstract philosophy floating above lived reality but an embodied practice, rooted in land, memory, and care, that can guide contemporary societies toward more humane and interconnected futures. In Bhabha's language, they perform the work of "cultural translation," carrying the ethical resources of Naga tradition into the "in-between" spaces of global discourse, where they can enter into productive exchange without losing their distinctiveness. In Spivak's terms, they enact an "epistemic disobedience," refusing the authority of dominant moral narratives while proposing alternatives grounded in subaltern agency.

Ultimately, the legacy of Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao lies not only in the stories they tell but in the moral possibilities they open. They challenge readers, both within and beyond Nagaland, to reflect on the ethical commitments that bind communities together, to care for the fragile bonds between human beings and their environments, and to recognise that moral life is sustained not by rigid adherence to inherited rules but by the capacity to adapt those rules to the changing needs of the present. Their works remind us that literature, at its most powerful, is both a mirror and a lamp: reflecting the moral worlds we inhabit and illuminating the paths we might yet take.

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