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Tribal Cultural Ethos and *Spirit Nights*

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Abstract:

Cultural ethos produces certain ideological traits in the people of that community which are expressed in the art and literature. According to the Marxist theory of literary criticism, sociological study of literature establishes the link between society and its various imaginative art forms. Tribal literature, a very recent categorical label, came into vogue after the learned and literate tribal authors began to contribute to the creative writing. The tribal writing is deeply root in the culture of the author. Tribal literature provides us insights into the pagan life of the people. We get an access to their belief system, to their quotidian life style, their mystical sustenance into the wilderness, their complex and symbiotic relation with ecology through tribal art and literature. Their written literature is based on oral literary tradition. Tribal literature is the epitome of sociology of literature. The present paper aims at studying, examining and explaining the outgrowth of literature from tribal oral tradition and myth-world with special reference to Esterine Kirke *Spirit Nights* published in 2022 and honoured with a prestigious JCB Prize. The seemingly simple story of a Chang Naga folk beautifully gives vivid description of community life. The novel shows the unique philosophy of the Naga people towards existence. The paper also aims at evaluating how that philosophy is relevant in the present context.

Keywords: Culture, Ethos, Tribal mythic world.

1. *When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.* (an old African proverb)
2. *Culture is ordinary* (Raymond William)

Estrine Kire's novel *The Spirit Night* is a paradigmatic text that provides insights and overview in the Naga culture. The Chang Naga community folklore about the darkness is the allegorical base of the novel. Like her other novels the native Naga community life with its myth, folklore,



cultural rituals, beliefs, social practices, agrarian practices, taboo system, festivals, medicinal practices is at the centre of cultural vignette in the novel. She has retained the practice of storytelling in any tribal community. Reading the novel means taking a tour through the life people living in the region. The hunting community has deep respect for nature and its laws. There are two worlds in the novel. One is the world of living and the other is the world of dead. The boundary of separation between them is very thin. The living and the dead are in constant contact. The dead are not dead they have become spirit and can guide, control and harass the living. Sometimes the spirits enter directly and sometimes through the dreams of the living. The spiritual and the natural is blended in it. The survival is the sole motive of the living in this magical world. The living willingly accosts the dead to find the future and solutions to the community problems. The novel is not a story of an individual but of a community. The quotidian life of the community is deeply rooted in cultural practices and taboos. The community people are so united that they have no altercation among themselves. They face any external danger collectively. They could defeat any evil and catastrophe collectively. They are ready to sacrifice their lives for the safety of the community. This altruistic nature is the ethos of the community depicted in the novel. When their village is destroyed completely, they are dilemma if to leave the village and settle somewhere else. The seer gets the dream and it is interpreted and they decided to rebuild the village with very small number of families. Every tribal culture has its own environmental friendly food and cuisine system which is the part of the narration in the Spirit Nights, Bodirsky and Johnson state in their paper that *Storytelling served as a means to share vital lessons across generations about the relationship between plants, animals, and people, and the importance of maintaining relations of respect and reciprocity between humans and their world.* (03)

They have developed their own knowledge system of survival and sustenance. The geographical necessity is assimilated in the quotidian culture and social practices. They listen to the headman and the seer. Any community decision is taken by the headman and the seer. The people follow myths and are unwilling to go against it. Those who go against the taboos are punished sometimes with death; an elderly person says, *Breaking a taboo always breaks the violator.* (21). It is the culture of myth-making and beliefs in the myths is preserved through the stories which are orally circulated from generation to generation. The novelist in one of her interviews has



mentioned that Chinua Achebe's novels have inspired her writings. What he has done to preserve the indigenous culture is being done by Kire also. It is opined by Grey and Newman, (i)ndigenous cuisine is either overlooked or else appears deIndigenized within the national culinary culture – an outcome catalyzed by its having travelled a very different, colonial path to multicultural incorporation. (720)

They believe that if a man is born from half-man and half-spirit, he is so powerful that he is invincible. Spirit Origin (37) is the source of magical physical strength which is not seen in any normal human being. Like all tribal communities this one has the tradition of passing life wisdom through stories of unknown origin. Behang tells the stories after dinner which has a message. His is the job story teller. It is the novel with many stories within stories. The novel is one story made of many stories that constitute the ethos of the tribal community. In the community there is the informal method of teaching. Namu learns every life skills from his grandmother Tola. Every child in the community learns the entire task from the elders. Hunting, catching birds, protecting the village from the attack of wild animals, collecting berries, selecting plants for the medicinal use are the life skills in the community knowledge of which is imparted through the informal education system. One such story ends with, never harbor pride, pride destroys everything. There is no protection against the spirit of pride and it does not matter whether you are a human or spirit pride will always find you out and consume you utterly. (38)

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