

Culinary Perspectives in Spirit Nights and Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered

V. Vijayavadivu, M.A, SET, NET, (Ph.D.), Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Sree Saraswathi Thyagaraja College, Pollachi
Dr. R. Vennila Nancy Christina, Associate Professor and Head, PG & Research Department of English, Sree Saraswathi Thyagaraja College,
Pollachi

Corresponding author: vvijayavadivu26@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the culinary perspectives present in Easterine Kire's novels *Spirit Nights* (2022) and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003; revised edition 2018). Food functions not merely as a biological necessity in these narratives but also as a powerful cultural symbol that reflects the social structure, collective memory, and spiritual worldview of the Naga community. The culinary traditions depicted in these novels illustrate rituals, taboos, ecological awareness, and community practices that shape everyday life in Naga society. Through feasts, agricultural practices, preservation of food, and communal cooking, Kire presents food as a narrative device that strengthens kinship ties and reinforces cultural identity. The study draws upon theoretical insights from food studies scholars such as Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Sidney Mintz, and Mary Douglas to analyse the symbolic and social dimensions of food representation in the novels. The article argues that culinary practices in Kire's fiction function as an archive of cultural memory and community formation while also reflecting ecological relationships between humans and their environment. By examining the cultural meanings attached to food, this study highlights how culinary narratives contribute to understanding indigenous knowledge systems and social traditions within Naga society.

Keywords: culinary perspectives, food culture, taboos, community formation, Naga society

Introduction

Food has emerged as an important subject in literary studies because it connects everyday life with cultural identity, memory, and social relationships. Culinary narratives often reveal how communities construct meaning through food practices, rituals, and shared meals. In literary texts, food may function as a symbolic language that communicates cultural values, traditions, and historical experiences. Roland Barthes in his essay *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* argues that food is not merely a nutritional substance but a system of communication that carries cultural and symbolic meanings.

In the context of indigenous literature, food becomes even more significant because it represents ecological knowledge, agricultural traditions, and communal lifestyles. Easterine Kire, one of the most prominent voices in contemporary Naga literature, frequently portrays everyday life in Naga villages with rich cultural details. Her works often highlight the relationship between people, nature, and tradition. The novels *Spirit Nights* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* offer valuable insights into the culinary traditions of the Angami Naga community. Through descriptions of feasts, preservation of food, communal cooking, and drinking rituals, Kire portrays food as a vital element in shaping cultural identity and social relations.

This article examines how culinary practices function within the narrative structure of these novels. It focuses on the cultural meanings of food in four important dimensions: food as a means of community formation, food as memory and identity, food and the natural environment, and food security in agrarian life. By analysing these aspects, the study aims to demonstrate how culinary traditions reflect the social and cultural life of the Naga people.

Food as a Means of Community Formation

One of the most important functions of food in Kire's narratives is its role in strengthening communal relationships. In traditional Naga society, feasting is not only a social activity but also a cultural ritual that reinforces kinship and collective identity. The novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* presents several instances where food becomes a central element in social gatherings and ceremonial events.

For example, when Kovi visits Keviselie's house to learn about the upcoming feast, the conversation reveals how feasting functions as a means of social bonding. Kovi himself had organized feasts when his wife was alive, indicating that hosting a feast is both a social responsibility and a marker of prestige within the community. Keviselie explains that he has invited his maternal relatives and his father's uncles, showing how extended kinship networks are maintained through shared meals and ceremonial gatherings.

The preparation of the feast involves ritualistic practices that highlight the sacred nature of food. Before the feast day, Keviselie's family performs a chicken sacrifice ritual, during which he proclaims that the food prepared for the ceremony should be abundant. Such rituals reflect the belief that food production and consumption are closely linked to spiritual blessings and communal prosperity. The preparation of meat using specific types of wood such as *phrie* and *kurhi* also demonstrates the traditional knowledge embedded in culinary practices. The Feast of Merit, an important cultural institution among the Angami Nagas, further illustrates how food functions as a symbol of generosity and status. After organizing his first Feast of Merit, Keviselie distributes generous portions of meat to his clansmen and friends. The village continues to talk about this feast for a long time, indicating the social recognition associated with such events. Through these scenes, Kire shows that food sharing is not merely a domestic activity but a social practice that strengthens community ties and reinforces cultural values.

Food and Cultural Memory

Food also serves as an important medium through which memories and emotional experiences are preserved. Fabio Parasecoli notes that eating involves physical, emotional, and cognitive interaction with the surrounding environment. In literary narratives, food often acts as a trigger for memories, reminding characters of their past experiences and relationships.

In *Sky is My Father*, sensory experiences related to food frequently evoke memories of family life and village traditions. When Piano walks past Apfu's house and smells bamboo shoots being cooked over the fire, the aroma itself becomes a powerful reminder of familiar domestic routines. Such sensory descriptions illustrate how food connects individuals to their cultural surroundings.

Another example appears in the interaction between Levi and his mother. Levi's mother advises him to return home and eat the food prepared by his wife instead of eating at his mother's house. Her words suggest that food also symbolizes marital relationships and domestic harmony. Through this scene, Kire shows how cooking becomes a meaningful expression of care and affection within the family.

At the same time, the novel also reflects social attitudes toward certain food-related practices such as excessive drinking. Levi tells his companions that drinking brew does not prove a man's worth. He recalls that those who drink excessively would not be reliable leaders during battles. This perspective highlights how food and drink can also carry moral meanings within a community. Culinary practices therefore become a reflection of social values and ethical norms.

Food and the Natural Environment

Another significant aspect of culinary representation in Kire's novels is the strong connection between food practices and the natural environment. Traditional Naga communities depend heavily on forests, rivers, and agricultural lands for their food resources. As a result, culinary practices are deeply intertwined with ecological knowledge and environmental awareness.

In the novel, Levi and his companions travel through forest paths while preparing their meals during journeys. When they cook food in the jungle, they carefully cover the fire with leaves after cooking. This practice serves two purposes. First, it prevents enemies from detecting their location

during times of conflict. Second, it protects the forest from accidental fires. Such scenes demonstrate the ecological consciousness embedded within traditional food practices.

The method of creating smokeless fires under plantain leaves further illustrates the ingenuity of indigenous cooking techniques. These techniques reflect a deep understanding of the natural environment and its resources. By including such details, Kire emphasizes that food preparation is not only a domestic activity but also an ecological practice shaped by environmental conditions.

Food Security and Agrarian Life

Agriculture forms the backbone of food security in the village society depicted in the novel. The fertile fields of Khonoma provide abundant harvests, ensuring that the community rarely experiences famine. The narrative mentions that the village has never known a year of famine or want because the agricultural system is supported by both environmental resources and spiritual beliefs.

The villagers cultivate crops using traditional farming methods and also rely on rivers and forests for additional food sources such as fish and crabs. This diverse food system helps maintain stability in times of scarcity. The presence of preserved foods such as dried herbs and garlic hanging in kitchens also reflects the importance of food preservation techniques in ensuring survival during winter months.

The storage of herbs and other ingredients for later use demonstrates the foresight and resourcefulness of the community. It also shows how culinary practices are closely connected with seasonal cycles. Through these descriptions, Kire highlights the resilience of traditional food systems and their ability to sustain communities across generations.

Culinary Taboos and Social Regulation

Culinary traditions in Naga society are also shaped by cultural taboos and social regulations. Certain foods are associated with specific rituals, while others may be restricted during particular events or stages of life. Anthropologists such as Mary Douglas have argued that food taboos often function as systems of social order that reinforce cultural norms. In Kire's narratives, food taboos are implied through rituals and ceremonial practices. The sacrificial offering of animals before feasts indicates that food consumption must follow specific cultural protocols. These practices reinforce the idea that food is not merely a commodity but a sacred element connected with spiritual beliefs.

Conclusion

The culinary representations in Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* and *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* reveal the deep cultural significance of food within Naga society. Food functions as a central element in community formation, cultural memory, environmental interaction, and social regulation. Through detailed descriptions of feasts, cooking practices, and agricultural traditions, Kire highlights how culinary culture reflects the collective identity of the Angami people. Scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, and Sidney Mintz have shown that food practices often mirror broader social structures and power relations. In Kire's narratives, culinary traditions serve as an important narrative tool that connects individuals to their community and environment. The preparation and sharing of food create spaces for social interaction, cultural continuity, and emotional connection. Thus, the study of culinary perspectives in these novels demonstrates how food narratives contribute to understanding indigenous knowledge systems and cultural heritage. By documenting everyday culinary practices, Kire preserves valuable aspects of Naga culture and offers readers a deeper insight into the social and cultural life of the region.

Abbreviations

WTRS- When the river sleeps

SIMF- Sky is my Father: A Naga Village Remembered

CF- Culinary Fictions

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