



DYNAMICS OF CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN ROVI CHASIE'S *THE QUAIN T LITTLE VILLAGE*

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Abstract

The Quaint Little Village: Stories from Khonoma, published in 2016, is Rovi Chasie's lone fictional work. It consists of ten short stories about the episodic experiences of Tono, the child protagonist, whose visits to her ancestral village form the creative basis of the stories. Informative details are skillfully woven into the spontaneous conversations and comments arising out of the situation. We discover a treasure trove of traditional way of life and ecosystem through the young Gen Z eyes of Tono, whose growing consciousness of indigenous beliefs, values and practices, in turn, transmits the dynamics of continuity and change, tradition and modernity, rural village and urban city. It conveys the need for a fine balance of heritage and adaptation in tribal communities. *The Quaint Little Village* exhibits embedded narrative technique with a story within a story, which not only widens and deepens knowledge effortlessly, but can exemplify that storytelling as pedagogy, fosters learning engagement and inclusive cultural connections and understanding across all age groups.

Keywords

Angami Community, Continuity And Change, Storytelling Pedagogy, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Naga people in the Northeast of India comprises of many tribes with different languages. There are 17 recognized tribes, Angami tribe being one of them. There are many villages under each tribe and Khonoma is an Angami village within the district of Kohima. Their history is generally divided into three broad periods: Ancestral Period of preliterate times prior to 1832, when the British first set foot in Naga inhabited territories; Colonial Period extends up to 1947 with their retreat; Post Colonial Period, since Indian Independence.

Rovi Chasie's *The Quaint Little Village: Stories from Khonoma*, consists of ten short stories which exemplifies inbuilt storytelling pedagogy as an effective educational approach. Tono, the child protagonist's episodic visits to her ancestral village form the creative basis of the stories. Meaningful details emerge out of the conversations prompted by the situation. For instance, we learn about the indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants in khonoma, through their conversations, when Tono and her family go to collect them for her school project. The subject of Angami taboo is set off when an old man slowly sipped his local brew but did not join in the sumptuous picnic meal, to the surprise of the little girl. An "embedded narrative technique" with a story within a story, is employed (Glossary of Narrative Terms). Tono, gets to hear little stories and relive bygone memories from older relatives in her ancestral village. Inquisitive like all children, Tono is spirited and her impressionable imaginative mind leads to many follow-up



questions naturally. The stories unfold during their family outings to the quaint little village. We effortlessly learn of traditional way of life and ecosystem through her eyes, which in turn, renders a sense of continuity and change. Tono's emotional reactions and responsive comments sprinkled with humour, offer insights into a child's psychology, and the narrations come alive. Through it all, there is an unmistakable sense of continuity and change. *The Quaint Little Village* exhibits embedded narrative technique with a story within a story, which not only widens and deepens knowledge effortlessly, but can exemplify that storytelling as pedagogy fosters learning engagement and cultural understanding across all age groups.

Naga villages like khonoma, the quaint little village of the book's title, act as reservoirs of a Tribe's culture and indigenous knowledge. Whereas, the urbanized cities and townships of mixed populations of different tribes and non-local plainsmen, like the capital city of Kohima, where Tono's family resides, have witnessed much changes. Colonial period saw major changes, resulting in the introduction of modernization and Christianization. Establishment of formal schools led to the discontinuity of their morungs or dormitories as hub-bubs of oral informal education. New professions and government services soon appeared and expanded in the urban areas, as seen in the way government officials descended on the quaint little village when a Princess visited and the villagers were called upon to present their history, culture and tradition in an instant. Acculturation of foodways is significant, where traditional and non-native ingredients and culinary methods are blended to bring about novel tastes, as with the twenty two "Naga-flavored snacks" laid out for the Princess (22). Today such snacks would include oven-baked cakes and biscuits made out of traditionally produced rice, banana, millet, Job's tears etc. Food taboos receded, while folk narratives and folksongs which are once part and parcel of their lives, took a backseat.

According to Dorson, folklore broadly consists of Oral literature or verbal art, which include folktales, folk legends, sayings and taboos; Material culture, those of handicrafts, costumes, weapons and memorial stones; Social folk customs, which includes festivals, socio-cultural and religious practices; Performing arts, like, Folksongs and folk dances (eGyanKosh). Nagaland under 371 A of the Indian Constitution, to a large extent, safeguards Naga tribal way of life. According to the 2011 Census, the tribal population of India constitutes 8.6% of the total population, with a huge population of 89.9% of them living in rural areas.

Methodology and Significance of the Study:

A qualitative close reading of Chasie's book will render a critical understanding of the dynamics of change and continuity, tradition and modernity, rural village and urban city, of the Angami Community in the 21st Century. The significance of this study lies in the way it reveals insights into Angami indigenous knowledge, of the need to distinguish between positive cultural practices from those practices which have lived out its purpose. Yet, that the ancestral past as history is crucial to safeguard their identity as a people, is validated. An embedded narrative technique employed, with a story within a story, not only widens and deepens knowledge effortlessly, but can exemplify that storytelling as pedagogy, fosters learning engagement and cultural understanding across all age groups and communities.

Analysis of *The Quaint Little Village: Stories from Khonoma*:

Khonoma village is situated in the outskirts of Kohima, the capital city of Nagaland, within a short distance of about 20 kilometres. Though a small Angami village, it has a place in the history of as a small strategically fortified village that stubbornly resisted the British colonial expansion in the, then, uncharted Naga inhabited regions in the northeast of India. Incidentally, it is the village in Easterine Kire's novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first novel in English by a Naga writer.



Till today, there are landmarks of the colonial presence in the little village, like the memorial monument of the British political officer, G. H. Damant, who was killed in the Battle of Khonoma in 1879. The “Bungalow” mentioned was built by the British as their rest house. As a retaliatory measure to punish the village for the death of Damant, Khonoma was burnt down and was abandoned for a period of time, some families never went back to settle there again and have adapted to urbanized modern way of life. *The Quaint Little Village* exhibits embedded narrative technique with a story within a story, which not only widens and deepens knowledge effortlessly, but can exemplify that storytelling as pedagogy fosters learning engagement and cultural understanding across all age groups.

The story, *The Monstrous Trees*, reflects both continuity and change within the Angami community, which is also true with the other Naga tribes, but more pronounced with the Angami tribe as the more urbanized Capital of the State lie within their region. What the protagonist of the book, Tono, only sees and reads in her school textbooks, she gets to actually observe in her ancestral village - “Real cows, real cows! I can see real cows, just like in my picture book! (9). Though only a short distance separates it from Kohima, the ecology is vastly different in the village. Tono’s reactions, questions and comments, unravel the continuities and changes. When Tono’s gaze fell upon some gnarled looking trees, she exclaims with fright, “Monster trees!!”, which prompts a disconnect between the rural life and its landscape and those of the urban city (9). Realizing that the so-called monster trees were really the pollarded Alder trees which can look ugly with its stunted stumps, to a sensitive imaginative child, her father regaled her with the wonders of the tree, some having lived for more than 200 years. He explains how the trees have come to take such distorted shapes but how the Alder tree is actually “a miracle tree and God’s gift to the people” (12). We also get to hear that the antiquity of Alder-based jhum method of cultivation is attributed to Angami farmers of Khonoma, and the benefits of the fast-growing tree. Its uses included firewood for domestic fuel, furniture-making, house building, medicinal application for its property to stop bleeding, besides preventing soil erosion and ensuring soil fertility due to their nitrogen-fixing leaves. Indigenous knowledge has sustained the Alder tree culture till today.

The story, *Shükhieu* narrates the family’s visit to Khonoma, this time to celebrate the “official banning” of indiscriminate hunting. As they go about their usual activities, readers pick up cultural beliefs, practices and values which can be alien to those living in the cities and townships. Tono could see all the green tin rooftops as khonoma has been declared the first Green Village in India. As they walked by the village well, some villagers were bathing, some washing clothes, some fetching water for their kitchens. Many homes still do not have running taps. Tono made sure she greeted everyone at the well “Nieko meri se bietie!”/“you are all so busy!”, to which they replied in unison, “U ho!”/ “Yes!” (14). The narrative goes on to add that unlike in the cities where little girls were not supposed to talk to strangers, here it is considered impolite if one did not talk to everyone one meets. Tono ran across the *Phetso* or village common ground which is nearby their village house, to look at the rock face of *Shükhieu*, the mythical guardian of wild animals. It was said that from time to time, people see visible changes on the rock face on the side of *Hophera Mount*. In the olden days, different expressions would indicate the success or failure for hunters. All Tono yearned for was to get a glimpse of facial expression on this tantalizing rock face. After a long time of staring and peering, she let out a soft joyful “yes, yes!” (16). Her mother wondered whether Tono finally saw what she wanted to see, “A smirk, perhaps!” (16). Such a conclusion, neither affirms nor denies the truth of the belief, but the legend is kept alive and visitors would stare and strain at the rock face.

When a Princess Came Calling is based on the actual visit of the Princess of Thailand to Khonoma village in 2014 when she came to Nagaland. The story brings out the stark difference of



two cultures, one of royalty and the other of democracy, even described as “pure democracy” by western ethnographers during colonial times who left natives to be ruled by their own customary laws in keeping with their non-interference policy (Hutton). Unlike some other Naga tribes, Angamis do not even practice “chieftainship system” but individuals who prove themselves to be dependable and trustworthy, are selected as the village elders and given due respect (*Naga Customary Practices: Angami* 35). The historical Khonoma village, is a favourite destination of tourists and visiting dignitaries of the State. Khonoma has been conferred the Silver Award as the Best Offbeat Destination in India at the Outlook Traveller's Award, 2022 (*Life in Khonoma* 60).

This story has an Epigraph in verse, heralding the arrival of a Princess and the birth of a baby girl in Kohima, who has been named *Kedinuo*, which means “Princess” (17). Such is keeping with their way of naming infants according to memorable events coinciding with their births. Angami people still name their newborn members meaningfully with great care. Many believe that people live up to their names. “Soon after a child is born, parents, grandparents or relatives try to give him/her a name and the name should be meaningful, significant for the parents or about the parents’ situation, etc.” (*Naga Customary Practices: Angami* 36).

Tono’s rotund face which her friends termed, “smiley”, was among the sea of faces to witness the rare spectacle of the royal visit (17). The Chief Secretary of Nagaland, who happened to be a daughter of the quaint little village, was leaving no stone unturned to make the visit a grand success. When finally the hour arrived, one glance of Her Royal Highness and Tono’s heart sank as she had expected to behold “a Barbie Princess look-alike” (21). Her mother chided her gently and said that even princes and princesses grow old. This also reflects the different up-bringing of a city-bred child like Tono, who vastly differs from her counterparts in the villages, who instead of playing with dolls will be tending to younger siblings as their parents work in the fields. The women folks sang the welcome folksong, dressed in their best traditional costumes. Naga-flavoured snacks were served and traditional gifts, including a “Mekho” (bamboo basket with a head sling) were presented to her (22). Khonoma *mekho* weavers, especially *khophi* variety, are still known for their skill in basketry (Asia InCH). While such head-baskets are indispensable to villagers for carrying working tools, lunch packs, firewood, grains etc., those residing in towns and cities hang them as decoration pieces. On another trip to the village, when Tono wished to relive the happy moments, not a remnant of the glorious visit was visible. But just as she turned away sadly, she caught sight of the memorial stone, “Tsiese”, which had been erected to commemorate the visit, and her spirits rose again at the thought of the proud spirit of her village. The simple village folks, we are told, left their household chores and toiled as a community to uphold the pride and hospitality of the village. Such is in line with their sense of *Mhoshoh*, a concept of social ethics among the khonoma people, which for instance, “challenges them to do the hardest task and carry the heaviest load” (*Life in Khonoma* 49). In 1881, Lieutenant-Colonel Woodthorpe reports, “The Angamis struck us as a very cheerful, frank, hospitable, brave race” (55).

“Shünyi and the Two Graves” story sprouts from an age-old traditional occasion, when the dead are remembered and their graves and its surroundings are cleared of weeds. This practice is still being observed by some, without the rites and rituals of old. The episode shows how much more pronounced the gap between village and township had become, since the rise of the literate social strata and professionalism in Naga society. The story also gives a sense of the flora and fauna of the village as also of a legend which aptly fits into the story.

On such a day, Tono’s family went to their village to clear the weeds of the graveyards of two relatives dear to them. The two died old but were “worlds apart in terms of lifestyles” (26). One lived in the village and lived a typical village life, converting to Catholic faith on her death bed knowing the predicament of family members who worried over the fact that she had no male



relatives close enough to perform her last *Nanyü* rites. The other person was Tono's grandfather, one of the early medical doctors of the village, and his tomb stood beside a pretty house among the rhododendron trees along a parking lot. Seeing grandmother's empty tomb beside grandfather's, the distressed Tono prayed that God would never take her away. Her thoughts flew to the magic plant that is said to restore life which grew at a place called "*Kedieu Tsukeru*" on a mountain peak (30). The legend of *kedieu tsükerü*, which literally means, rolling of *Kedieu*'s head, is about a warrior from the village who was returning with the head of *Kedieu* who is an enemy. As he reached the slopes of this peak, the head came alive and bit him. When the man quickly tried to untie the head, it rolled away. It was believed that the head came to life due to the presence of the life-giving plant, *Ginseng*, which is found in the area. Such legends are not only heard but literally visited, for being part of the landscape itself. *Khonoma* is a favourite village for ecotourism and in recent years home-stay lodges and tourist guides provide local employment.

An Outing with Atsa Reino is about one memorable visit to the village museum with an old lady, *Atsa Reino*. What is prominently seen is the way ancestral times of head-hunting now belonged to the museum, which housed ancient articles and artifacts. As their significance is an enigma to Tono, the old lady narrated of the bygone warrior days. Life as a warrior community is in the past, but storytelling continues. *Atsa Reino* explained to the child that territorial enmity between villages was common then. At the same time they were simple, honest, and kept their word of honour. Bravery is rewarded. The warrior who is the first to charge the enemy in battle earns the right to wear the *Thakie*, a special shield; the warrior the last man to return rewarded with the right to wear the *Thami*, a tail piece.

As with Tono, traditional poems and songs cannot be comprehended by the younger generations today, without the aid of knowledgeable older folks. That many folksongs and poetic verse have references to stories or events which were once common knowledge, complicate matters. *Atsa Reino* tells a story behind a poem about two young women whose lovers had gone to war, which ends with a lesson to be learnt. As the two women wait for their return, one expresses her wish:

Tei we rühie rüniahie dinu

Rügwí si-u yazer a tso.

(May the heavens neither rain nor shine and may the withering weather clothe my beloved warrior and return him to me) 34.

The other woman lament-like, wished that her warrior, should he die, be not changed into a bee or a butterfly, but turn into a majestic hornbill and in faraway places hover over noble men and find a final resting place. It was said that both their wishes came true, one lover returned, while the lover of the lamenting woman perished. Like many oral stories, this story too has a moral to be learnt. That one should not tempt fate by contemplating on death or tragic loss before it has taken place.

As for Tono, when the day's expedition to the museum with the attending explanatory little stories within the story, some gruesome for the little girl, comes to an end, she "ran her tiny fingers through her hair, flicked it and shivered" (38). What is a seemingly little reaction, a shiver, can indicate how far removed she is from the world of old *Atsa Reino*, whose own memory of the olden days would have been the experiences of her own parents i.e. only four generations apart, and times have changed, where some things are beyond recognition.

The story, *The Family Picnic*, also accounts for a markedly changed world, arising out of a simple instance of an old grand man quietly sipping his local brew from a bamboo mug, without partaking in the picnic meal. When Tono commented about it, her father in a reflective tone said that perhaps the reason why the old man did not join in the meal was because Tono's mother had her head covered that day, or because their main picnic dish was chicken cooked with mushroom.



He explained that people in the olden days did not accept food and drinks from women who had their heads covered as they do when in mourning the loss of a family member. Thus, even at home, the head would be uncovered before dishing out a meal, as opposed to covering the head which was considered a requirement of hygiene for someone handling food and drinks in modern practice. Here, Tono was all for maintaining hygiene. Talking about hair, led Aunt Sano, who was one of the picnickers, to share something about the ‘bald ones’ and a ‘hairless hair-raising tale’ (42). That in the old animistic days, young maidens were not allowed to grow hair before marriage. When Tono queried of what became of those who neither married nor became Christian, she was told that such maidens had the option of a mock marriage with the Village Gate termed as *kharukini* so that they could grow their hair. Again, in the old world, it was taboo to cook chicken with mushroom for fear that it would cause goiter. However, Aunt Sano said that the actual reason behind this taboo, as some say, was because these two ingredients make a very tasty dish and that could deplete them, hence, it was declared taboo. So also with chilly leaves, which was said to be full of flavour but if the plant is stripped it would not bear any chilly, similarly, it was declared taboo to cook its leaves. Tono learnt farsighted wisdom that day of the picnic outing. She also remembered what her aunt also said, that if one takes back what was given, one would become deaf. Such were ingenious ways to inculcate prudent ways and social values. The picnic party also came across a Mithun (*bosfrontalis*), their majestic State Animal, which reflects the continuity of the traditional practice of owning such semi wild bovine, even by some city dwellers. To call them out of the jungle, cowherds would blow their *ketsü* horn.

As they were returning, sitting by the window of their vehicle, Tono watched some village folks pounding and cleaning rice, and she resolved that she, too, would mull over the age-old beliefs and “winnow them, to retain the seeds and discard the chaff” (45).

Of Spirits and Ghosts opens with how, on every trip to the village, Tono would be craning her neck looking out for a stone jutting out on the slope nearby *Dzüna* River. Atsa Vilewheno had once told her that this stone had unpredictable magical powers so that villagers keep away. Such stories of sacred rocks and stones abound among the Angamis. There is a tendency of superstitiousness among the Naga people, as a whole. Young as she is, Tono, too, has caught the superstitious mind-set and she would whisper, “Peace be with you”, whenever they pass by this stone on their way to Khonoma, and whenever she listens to the ghost stories told by her relatives in the village (47). She wondered what it would be like to encounter a *Miagweno*, the mythical creature. Some say sightings of this creature bring good luck, while others consider it to be bad luck. But all agreed that it looked beautiful with long hair that reaches the ground, though it eerily leaves footprints with the toes pointing backwards. In the olden days people traveled on foot, and would tell of ghostly encounters at *Dzüna*. So also, a story goes about a certain cousin called Shalie, who gave a brave shout, “Aha ha ha A thepfümia/ I am a man!” but fled at the same (49). Such humorous touches are interspersed in the narrations. The story goes on to add that some people also say the presence of ghosts emit a certain smell or cause one to sense a strange presence out of nowhere, though items like metal, matchsticks, penia (Indian wormwood plant) etc., repel ghosts. When Tono wondered if these items really worked, her mother replied in the “affirmative but also said that with the advent of Christianity many people now consider these theories as mere mumbo jumbo” (50). Because of the belief among Angamis that ghosts and spirits prefer to encounter average men and women who are neither too fearless nor too scared, Tono cleverly classed herself among the faint-hearted and does not fear ghosts.

Windows to Tono’s World tells of how, through each window of their village house, Tono have access to different scenarios of the quaint little village. From their “renovated” village house, through the windows, Tono could see three *kishüki* (traditional male dormitories); the village



Panchayat building; the *Phetso* common ground; An immediate neighbour's house; and the valley below of terraced paddy fields.

The narration reflects of how, though no longer thatch-roofed, khel-wise, houses are still clustered near each other within close proximity with nature. Traditional male dormitories still stand in their original sites, though their original purpose is a thing of the past. There is the relatively new Panchayat building, though Panchayat system in Nagaland is unique and relies on Village Councils in each major village (Xaxa 79). In his 1872-3 Report about the Angami region and adjoining lands, Godwin-Austen notes down that he had “never, even in the better-cultivated parts of the Himalayas, seen terrace cultivation carried to such perfection” and that the “rice raised is exceedingly fine and very nourishing” (11). Its picturesqueness is described by Moffatt Mills in 1854, as running “from the base to the summit of the hills in terraces and irrigated by channels cut from running streams” (291). To Tono, the terraced paddy fields and the sparkling brooks meandering down seems like silver streamers on a Christmas tree, which is indicative of an imaginative mind which is closer to the ecosystem of a modern city. She had earlier expected a Barbie Doll look-alike when a Princess visited her homeland, and was sure that the “mermaids and miagwenos were cousins” (48).

Out in the Forest finds the family making a trip to the village looking for herbal medicinal samples for her “school project” (57). Tono's father informed that the area between khonoma and Dzüleke was said to be home to “116 species” of medicinal plants identified by the villagers (57). Their own collection included *vilhunha* which villagers apply to stop bleeding. With plenty of time left, they visited Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary started by the village. The rare Blythe's Tragopan pheasant, the State Bird is native to Khonoma. As noted, too, by the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Nagaland is known as a biodiversity hotspot, as part of Indo-Burma (Myanmar) region which is one of the 36 recognized hotspots worldwide.

In *Future Tense*, the concluding story, the focus is on the significance of the importance of dreams for the native people. We hear of how an 81 year old lady once dreamt of accidentally dropping her headscarf into the fast flowing brook and was troubled by the dream the whole day. At dusk, she received the tragic news that her beloved granddaughter had drowned. She lamented loudly, thrashing the ground with her shawl, prancing around in anguish, as was Khonoma people way of expressing their great loss. The narration goes on to say that dreams are important for them so that it has become a habit, even today, to bid each other, “niemhovilo” /”wish you good dreams” in the evenings , or start up a conversation in the mornings with “kio niemho vizomo” /”So hope you had good dreams” (64). Interpretations of dreams differ, but in Khonoma, the name of the person one sees in a dream is believed to be of great significance. Names with words like, “mego- good fortune; kho- up or upward; kevi- goodness” etc are considered good omen (65). Tono's own mother said some of her dreams were so vivid and those were the ones she could reasonably interpret. As Tono and her cousin started squabbling, one about his dream and the other interpreting it, Tono's father intervened to hold the peace, and the book ends with quiet words of wisdom for the future: “Wise men say that if you want your dreams to come true, you must wake up, and that the only dreams you should pay heed to, are the ones you dream with your eyes wide open” (67).

Conclusion:

By strategically employing an embedded narrative technique with a story within a story framework in *The Quaint Little Village*, Chasie's work reveal the dynamics of continuity and change within the Angami community. Such inbuilt storytelling pedagogy enables the reader to experience cultural connections. As discussed, continuity of ancestral Angami way of life and tradition includes the practice, till date, of terraced paddy fields which is considered “the most



important asset in Angami context” (*Naga Customary Practices: Angami* 26). The importance of naming a child meaningfully continues; traditional *chiecha* and shawl is quite commonly worn, but full set of costume is only donned by men and women during their main festivals; traditional occasions, like *shünyi*, are observed by some but without the rituals; a sense of superstitiousness still survives with many and the sacredness of certain stones are maintained; many myths and legends are etched into their very landscape like *kreditsükerü*, *shükhieu* rock face; interpretation of dreams is not indulged in, as such; in the material culture domain, one of the most important items that is still commonly used in the Angami villages is the head-strapped basket *mekho*.

Conspicuous changes among the Nagas as a whole, which as pointed out, is brought about by Christianization and the introduction of formal education which led to the process of modernization. Very prominently seen in the villages is the church built at strategic sites. Traditional sites are normally left undisturbed, like *kichüki*/dormitory, though not functional as such. Food taboos are no longer heard of. In fact, as discussed there is much acculturation of foodways. Such blending of the local with other cultures, is also seen in their popular dressing culture and folk fusion music. Nowadays, folk legends and folktales are being digitized as with the popular legend of Sopfünuo. Mobile cell phones have penetrated the villages.

With the increasing pressures of contemporary lifestyles, effort to preserve and promote the positive ancestral socio-cultural values, irrespective of whether they live within the village or in towns, cities or outside of the state, is upheld. Towards this, to come together for traditional occasions, donning traditional costume occasionally is practiced. We hear of how Tono would wear her jeans beneath her *chiecha*, a wrap around for girls, for fear of dropping it in public and cause embarrassment (40). As such The Quaint Little Village, is a site of an interaction between the rural villagers and a city-bred Tono and her family. Angami rural villages are really the keepers of their oral tradition. However, because change is inevitable, the need to document further ancestral traditions, is urgently needed in future researches. Meanwhile, values like Khonoma *Mhosho* which keeps up the prestige and honour of the Angami community must continue.

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