



Genesis Revisited: Ecology, Memory, and Cultural Survival in Easterine Iralu's Poetics

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Citation: Lalthannguri, (2024). Genesis Revisited: Ecology, Memory, and Cultural Survival in Easterine Iralu's Poetics, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 01-05
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i11.11160

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Easterine Iralu's "Genesis" through an integrated approach that combines close reading with historicist, ecological, and cultural perspectives. The poem is shown to transform lament into an ethic of survival by converting grief into a sustained practice of memory. Its short lines, incantatory repetitions, and ritualised naming echo oral traditions, allowing the poem to function simultaneously as lyric and as an oral archive threatened by erasure. The analysis demonstrates that ecological and human losses in the poem are inseparable: the devastation of land, the silencing of song, and the exhaustion of the daughters collectively signify the broader historical processes that reshaped life in the Naga Hills. Through this lens, the figure of Plague becomes a composite symbol for intertwined forces of displacement, cultural disruption, and environmental deterioration. The study argues that the poem does not merely mourn these losses but proposes an actionable response rooted in continuity. The repeated injunction to "stay the songs" emerges as a disciplined technique of cultural preservation. Ultimately, the analysis concludes that "Genesis" enacts survivance by turning song into an instrument of resistance, remembrance, and renewal, ensuring that cultural identity persists even amidst historical and ecological rupture.

Keywords: Orality; Ecological Memory; Cultural Survivance; Historicist Reading; Postcolonial Resilience

Introduction

Easterine Iralu's short lyric "Genesis"¹ opens with a mythic register and then performs a compression of communal memory, ecological loss, gendered suffering, and eschatological hope. The poem's voice summons a figure - Keviselie - and a people whose "hills were untamed" and whose "daughters were seven". In the space of a few compact stanzas, an external invader or fate named Plague cuts through the prosperity of land and song; physical and cultural desiccation follow; yet a prophetic reclaiming voice intimates eventual restoration: "He speaks of another moon / when she will be made whole / restored to herself again". This analysis tracks how ecological, gendered, and political violences intertwine, but uses close reading as the procedural core: by examining diction, syntax, image clusters, pacing, and enjambment the analysis shows how the poem's form consistently enacts its themes. That thematic close reading is then supplemented by historicism: It situates the lyric within the history of the Naga Hills (colonial encroachment, missionary conversion, the long insurgency and its dislocations), and within debates about orality, ecocriticism, and postcolonial identity formation.

Origin, loss, and the language of song

The poem begins with an almost archetypal act of telling: "Keviselie speaks of a time / when her hills were untamed". The opening verb "speaks" makes the lyric simultaneously an oral report and a poetic utterance: the poem enacts speech about speech. That doubling is crucial, the narrative voice is not simply descriptive but performative; to "speak of" is to summon an oral archive. The grammar here is simple and declarative, which sets the tonal economy for the opening: the past is rendered accessible and palpable. The compound adjective "untamed" immediately imbues the landscape with agency; the hills are not merely empty stage settings but living forces with an autonomy that human history will register and, later, violate. In the following lines the land is figured as "soil young and virgin," an image cluster that fuses sexualized fertility

and temporal freshness; famously, the adjective “virgin” in the economies of origin myths marks both a pristine beginning and a value under threat. The poem thus establishes, in its first five lines, an Edenic ecology in which the human and the land breathe the same air: “her daughters were seven / with the mountain air in their breath.”

Two formal moves bear special scrutiny here because they shape the poem’s thematic valences. First, the enumerative detail, “daughters were seven”, gives an epic scale to what is otherwise a domestic set of images. The number seven is emblematic across world cultures; in the poem it suggests wholeness and ritual completeness. By choosing a numeral rather than an indefinite adjective (“many daughters”), Iralu fixes a symbolic quantity that will make the subsequent attrition both precise and catastrophic. Second, the couplets and short lines maintain a measured, almost incantatory rhythm: images, “hair the colour of soft summer nights,” “baskets overflowing”, are set in steady succession as if songs themselves tiled the field of perception. The poem’s phrase “their songs filled all the earth” translates vocal practice into spatial dominion; the music of the daughters is not merely private but communal and territorial, binding people to place by sonic memory. This early idyll will be ruptured by the sudden apparition of a named malefactor:

Till one called Plague, a sojourner grudged them their plenty and, wielding her terrible scythe reaped premature harvests of fields and men.”

The figure “Plague” is syntactically foregrounded, the capitalized, personified disease is given agency and motive: she “grudged,” she “wield[s]”; her weapon is a “terrible scythe.” The scythe image connects death and agrarian labor, and by placing “fields and men” in the same syntactic direct object the line collapses agricultural yield and human bodies into a single economy of loss. This syntactic collapsing is thematically important: ecological degradation and human death are not parallel but co-constituting. Formally, the enjambment of “wielding her terrible scythe / reaped premature harvests” accelerates the action, producing a breathless, almost cinematic effect that compresses time: the abundant world vanishes in a single lethal stroke.

Significantly, the poem refuses a reductive etiological explanation; Plague may be named but she is also a “sojourner,” which could signal an external invader (through colonial or epidemiological lens) or an impersonal fate. The ambiguity leaves open more than one register of loss, epidemic, war, missionary disruption, or cultural attrition, and this polyvalence is not accidental: the text wants the reader to perceive multiple registers of dispossession as intertwined. Close attention to diction matters here: the word “sojourner” implies temporariness and foreignness, whereas the later feminine personification (“her young, her songs, her hills”) insists on a possessive intimacy that Plague violates. The pronoun patterns, the repetition of “her” and “them”, maintain a female communality throughout; the community at risk is constantly feminized. The poem thus frames ecological fortune and cultural vitality through a maternal or feminine lens, so that the violence is experienced as a wound to gendered subjectivity as well as to communal life. The next stanza undertakes the image of attrition with unadorned clarity:

The seven grew weary and worn their soft-summer night locks grew lank and were shorn their music, dead notes scratched at parched throats.

The series of verbs maps bodily decline: “weary,” “worn,” “lank,” “shorn.” The diction leans toward somatic specificity; the “soft-summer night locks” that once signaled beauty are now “lank and were shorn,” an image that dramatizes enforced loss, hair as a metonym for dignity and identity removed. The coupling of “music” with failure, “dead notes / scratched at parched throats”, accomplishes two things: it renders cultural performance as a vulnerable, embodied act and it literalizes the failure of song (dead notes) as an index of linguistic or mnemonic breakdown. The verb “scratched” indexes an effortful, painful attempt to reclaim what is lost; there is no easy singing, only the mechanical irritation of memory against an arid throat. These precise verbal choices stage a decline from plenitude into a texture of exhaustion.

The stanza’s last lines, “and turned them heavily away / from the dry, the dead earth”, close the poem’s downward spiral with deliberate syntactic heaviness. The tripartite phrase “the dry, the dead earth” repeats the article and syntax and thus creates liturgical cadence while also flattening the land into an object of abandonment. The movement is from intimate communion (“their songs filled all the earth”) to estrangement (“turned them heavily away”), and this movement is staged as if the land itself had become uninhabitable both materially and culturally. The use of “heavily” is crucial: it suggests the force of grief and the burden of displacement rather than a light or reversible turning. The poem’s grammar therefore reflects the irreversibility of cultural and ecological rupture.

But “Genesis” does not end in total negation. The poem’s final tercet appeals to a figure, Keviselie again, and to an eschatological patience:

Ah Kelhoukevira Keviselie knows you better than you know yourself.

He speaks of another moon when she will be made whole restored to herself again but until such a time yea, until winter comes stay, stay the songs of Kelhoukevira.

The repetition of names, Keviselie, Kelhoukevira, creates a totemic echo; the voice of authority offers consolation. The modal contrast between “will be made whole” (future, speculative) and “but until such a time” (present injunction) sets up a tension between prophetic hope and ethical duty: the community must keep singing even if restoration remains deferred. The closing refrain “stay, stay the songs of Kelhoukevira” becomes, therefore, an imperative to memory: the act of singing is both the practice that sustains identity and the ritual that resists erasure.

The poem's short lines, measured enjambments, and repeated epithets work to reproduce the cadence and insistence of an oral archive threatened with silencing. Iralu's diction continually binds body, song, and land, so that the poem's images of hair, throat, scythe, and harvest become interlocked metaphors of ecological and cultural devastation. That reading can be sharpened further by placing the poem in historical context: the Naga Hills in the modern period experienced the simultaneous pressures of colonial encroachment, missionary conversion, and prolonged political conflict; these external vectors materially transformed land use, social structures, and modes of memory. To make those historical links responsibly, we must turn to ethnography and history.

Nagaland's past, orality, eco-memory, and postcolonial negotiation

If close reading reveals how the poem enacts loss and resistance in miniature, new-historicist and ethnographic sources help us locate the kinds of violences that frame that loss. Dolly Kikon's historical analysis of the "civilizing" colonial encounter in the Naga Hills shows how British imperatives to control trade and territory produced administrative incursions, missionary activity, and cultural regulation that reconfigured Naga lifeways (Kikon 139–63). Kikon demonstrates that the colonial project introduced schooling, Christian hymnody, and new land regimes that altered the modalities of song, ritual, and communal ownership; in other words, the structural conditions for cultural attrition in the Naga Hills are well documented (Kikon 139–63). Read alongside Iralu's poem, Kikon's scholarship helps us hear "Plague" not only as epidemiological but also as colonial and postcolonial displacement: cultural practices and ecological relations were disrupted by projects of state, mission, and capital.

The missionary era in the Naga Hills introduced literacy, Christian hymnody, and a new institutional grammar under which older ritual songs were delegitimized or confined to folkloric margins; such changes were reinforced by later political violence and administrative policies that constrained agrarian practice and mobility. The poem's stress on the musical ecology, "their songs filled all the earth", therefore anchors an index of cultural authority that colonial and later modernizing forces sought to reframe. As Dolly Kikon argues in her study of the colonial transformation of Naga society, schooling, and missionary discourses reshaped the symbolic orders of what counted as "civilized" music and speech; there is a clear historical consonance between that process and the poem's lament for songs turned to "dead notes" (Kikon 139–63).

Against this backdrop of erasure, the poem's recourse to orality is theoretically resonant. Walter J. Ong's classic account of primary orality and the "technologizing" of the word (writing, print, and then electronic media) provides helpful conceptual tools: Ong argues that primary oral cultures organize knowledge through formulaic, mnemonic devices, participatory performance, and communal rehearsal, and that literacy restructures cognitive maps of memory and individuation (Ong 3–24). When Iralu writes the imperative "stay, stay the songs," the poem's insistence takes on the tones of Ong's oral injunctions: repetitive refrains, formulaic naming, and ritual melodic function to preserve cultural memory against the forgetting tendencies of literate/colonial regimes. Thus the poem's formal insistence - repetition, names, incantation, is an embodied instance of oral survivance. Reading the poem with Ong's theory allows us to see the poem not simply as elegy but as an archival practice in the mode of vocal reiteration that resists the fragmenting effects of imposed literacies.

Yet, this reclamation of the oral sphere is inextricably bound to the physical landscape it narrates; consequently, ecocritical frameworks also enrich the poem's thematics. Cheryll Glotfelty's definition of ecocriticism, "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment", invites us to read Iralu's land imagery as ecological text: soil, harvest, scythe, and the sonorous field all mediate human entanglement with place. Glotfelty's introduction insists that literature both represents and participates in environmental discourse, and that literary forms can mobilize ecological ethics (xxvi). If one frames Iralu's "Genesis" as a compressed eco-poem, its elegiac voice is not merely metaphorical but political: to mourn the "dry, the dead earth" is to indict the human causes, whether extractive economy, colonial land regimes, or the violence of war and displacement, that produce aridity. Seen in this way, the poem's imperative to "stay the songs" becomes simultaneously a cultural and an ecological stewardship.

According to Stephen Greenblatt, literature is not a passive mirror but an active participant that both shapes and is shaped by its social formations (Greenblatt 1–10). In the "Genesis," the poem participates in Naga cultural reclamation: by naming Keviselie and Kelhoukevira it restores a vernacular archive within the English lyric. Greenblatt's insistence that literary meaning is co-produced with its historical instances helps justify reading the poem both as a mourning song and as a politically efficacious assertion of cultural continuity. Rather than treating the poem as a private lyric, Greenblatt's approach sanctions the text as intervention: it re-inscribes suppressed oral histories into a modern poetic idiom, thereby re-validating an endangered memory.

However, the mechanism of this 'vernacular archive' relies on a specific linguistic tension. According to Homi Bhabha cultural identity forms in ambivalent in-between zones rather than as pure essence; practices of mimicry, translation, and re-inscription are sites of resistance (Bhabha 37–52). Iralu's strategic use of English, a global literary language, to chant indigenous names and oral injunctions can be read as enacting a third space: the poem's English is not assimilationist but hybrid: it carries the cadences of Naga song even as it writes into a global lingua franca. From Bhabha's vantage, the poem's hybridity is productive: the poet reconfigures the colonizer's medium as a vehicle for indigenous memory, thereby unsettling fixed power

relations between center and periphery. This reading helps make sense of why the poem's English retains the repetition, parataxis, and incantatory force of oral performance, a deliberate aesthetic strategy that creates a liminal site of cultural re-animation.

Thus, Iralu's short lyric accomplishes a double task: it mourns the loss of a pre-dispossession ecology and it models a method of cultural preservation that uses the modern lyric to enact oral remembrance. That dual task is politically capacious. Historical studies of the Naga Hills indicate that communal displacements and cultural reordering have been the result of an interlocking set of forces (colonial extraction; missionary conversion; Indian state formation; post-1947 conflict and counterinsurgency). Dolly Kikon's ethnographic chapter documents how schooling and missionary hegemony remade social hierarchies and ritual practices, producing precisely the kinds of structural pressures against which the poem rebels (Kikon 139–63). The poem's invocation to "stay the songs" thus reads as a poetic program of cultural pedagogy: to teach memory in defiance of dispossession.

Conclusion: song as survival and the poem as praxis

The poem "Genesis" ultimately offers a vision in which lament becomes a disciplined and sustaining practice rather than an endpoint of grief. The text recognises that mourning, when left unshaped, can collapse into silence, yet it deliberately rejects this possibility by transforming sorrow into an ethic of continuity. The repeated call to sing becomes a deliberate technique of survival, a way of holding together a community that has been fractured by loss, dispersal, and the slow erosion of memory. The formal patterns of the poem, its short insistent lines and ritualised repetitions, imitate the very oral practices that preserve collective identity. These formal choices tether the poem to older modes of remembrance and ensure that cultural knowledge remains embodied, performed, and shared. The lyric therefore demonstrates that poetic structure is not ornamental but essential to the work of keeping memory alive.

The poem's imagery of devastation, particularly the figure of the scythe that cuts down both fields and men, underscores the scale of harm the community has endured. The destruction of land, the thinning of song, and the exhaustion of the daughters together suggest that the losses are environmental, cultural, and human at once. This layered devastation aligns with historical experiences in which communities in the region have confronted external pressures that disrupted traditional relationships with land, labour, ritual, and kinship. When read in this context, the poem's sorrow is not merely personal but collective, shaped by forces that exceed the individual and stretch across generations. The poem compresses these histories into stark images of dryness, silence, and weariness, allowing the reader to perceive the cumulative weight of loss without requiring explicit exposition.

Yet even while the poem evokes such profound desolation, it resists an ending rooted purely in despair. The lyric introduces a future moment in which restoration becomes imaginable, though not immediate. The hope the poem entertains is deliberately conditional. It refuses to promise quick renewal or a return to an untouched past. Instead, it stresses that the restoration of wholeness requires patience, discipline, and acts of care carried out in the present. This is why the imperative to continue singing is so insistently repeated. Memory is portrayed not as something that persists automatically but as something that must be safeguarded through repeated action. The command to stay the songs acknowledges that forgetting is always possible and that cultural identity must be tended like a living inheritance.

It is in this insistence on renewal through practice that the poem's political force emerges. The poem does not merely lament what has been lost, nor does it simply narrate the violence that produced that loss. It instead outlines a response, small in scale but profound in consequence. To sing, to name, to repeat, and to remember are presented as deliberate gestures that push back against erasure. These gestures consolidate community in the face of forces that have historically dissolved it. The poem positions everyday acts of cultural expression as a form of quiet resilience. The repetition of ancestral names, the rhythms of oral cadence, and the symbolic restoration of voice constitute a mode of resistance grounded not in confrontation but in continuity.

What the poem ultimately affirms is a vision of survivance that is active rather than passive. Cultural endurance appears not as the residue of what remains after catastrophe but as the result of choices made in the aftermath of that catastrophe. The poem's closing plea to stay the songs of Kelhoukevira crystallises this ethos. It conveys the idea that cultural identity is sustained not only by remembering the past but also by performing that memory in the present. Through its interweaving of lament and resolve, "Genesis" presents a community that refuses silence. The poem recognises that restoration may be slow and uncertain, yet it insists that the work of tending to cultural memory is itself a form of renewal. In this way the poem offers a vision in which song becomes both an archive of the past and a living instrument for shaping the future.

Note

¹ All direct quotations from Easterine Iralu's poem "Genesis" are taken from *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*, edited by Robin S. Ngangom and Kynpham S. Nongkynrih, pages 139 to 141.

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