

**Climbing the ladder of needs:
Analysing Levi through Maslow's theory in
Easterine Kire's *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered***

Noorul Arafa Syed Hafeez Peeran and Preetha Chandrahasan*

Abstract: Motivation is a psychological driving force that helps an individual achieve certain goals. It is a strong energy that shapes human behaviour, encouraging individuals to take the initiative and carry out specific duties. Every human being has a certain need that acts as a motivation to lead his/her daily life. Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, derived a theory that represents human needs in five levels in the form of a pyramid in his "A Theory of Human Motivation" (1943), published in *Psychological Review*. The theory elucidates physiological needs, safety needs, the need for love and belonging, esteem needs and self-actualization in a hierarchical manner, denoting that only after satisfying the primary needs, one can progress towards the next. Easterine Kire is a renowned novelist and short story writer from Nagaland. Her novel *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* elucidates the lives of the Angami Naga people. Set in a culturally rich tapestry of 1800s Khonoma, Kire picturises Levi, the protagonist as a great warrior and a cultural ambassador. This paper aims to analyse Levi in the light of Maslow's theory of motivation, which is also known as the 'Hierarchy of Needs', exploring from his basic needs till his step of attaining self-actualization in the novel *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*.

Keywords: Abraham Maslow, Easterine Kire, Levi, motivation, needs, self-actualization

Introduction

As an acclaimed writer from Nagaland, Easterine Kire gained notoriety for documenting the Naga people's customs and narrating their lifestyle. She has authored many novels, poems and short stories, frequently addressing topics like history, cultural preservation, identity

* Noorul Arafa Syed Hafeez Peeran; Preetha Chandrahasan (✉)

Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

e-mail: 263hana@gmail.com (corresponding author)

issues and folklore. “Khonoma is an incredible place with an incredible history. The terrain is rocky and the rock-like character of many of its heroes brings forth the things you mentioned - ‘the need to protect our land, and our culture’” (Maniar 2020). Easterine Kire is a post-colonial writer and a unique voice in modern Indian writing in English who skilfully portrays the struggles faced by the people of Nagaland during the period of British colonialism and Japanese invasion and intends to protect the culture in the form of literature. “Her writings represent a politically conscious positionality of the characters, context, and the plot to assert the culturally constituted identity through the revival of vibrant cultural practices and tribal epistemologies” (Kumar 2022, 1). *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* is a 2018 published novel considered as the first-ever Naga novel written in English. The novel is set in 1800s Khonoma, depicting the lives of the Angami Naga tribe. It surrounds Levi right from his childhood, exploring various stages of his life. Agriculture and war are the two to which major significance is provided by the characters in the novel.

Review of Literature

Many researchers have extensively investigated the novel *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, and they mostly encase the zone of culture, in which a few are as follows: Mandal and Singh (2022) in their article “Asserting Naga cultural identity and challenging colonialism in Easterine Kire’s *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*” broadly deals with the Naga people’s lives and colonialism. Kumar (2022) in “Imagined Ethnography and Cultural Strategies: A Study of Easterine Kire’s *Sky is My Father* and *Don’t Run, My Love*” draws an ethnographic framework and brings out the cultural identity in the novel. Mahato (2023) in the article “Vignettes of Naga Culture: A Reading of Easterine Kire’s *Sky is My Father*” deeply delves into indigenous practices and the struggles they face. As the novel revolves around the ancient Naga village and the indigenous population there, the Angami Naga practices and traditions have significance in the past research. Levi’s psychological shift has gained less attention. This paper intends at analysing Levi through the lens of Abraham Maslow’s theory.

Motivation

Motivation is a psychological drive that helps people realize their desires and reach certain goals. It establishes a person’s intensity of

willingness, the course of that endeavour and the perseverance of the goal. “The term motivation describes why a person does something. It is the driving force behind human actions. Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviours” (Cherry 2023). Motivation is a multifaceted, complex and dynamic phenomenon that is essential to human existence in both personal and professional spheres. Abraham Maslow is a 20th century eminent American psychologist and he is among the pioneers of humanistic psychology. “Maslow felt that human motivation needed to be studied beyond the contemporary scope of behaviourism, as he believed that the study of motivation should be human-centred rather than animal-centred” (Selva 2017). As an answer to his quest about what motivates human behaviour, he resolves that one of the main sources of motivation is the idea of needs in human existence. Needs are characterised as requirements or aspirations that cause distress and a disturbed mindset in a person’s life when unmet. As people take the initiative to meet these requirements, motivation plays a key role in easing discomfort and restoring equilibrium and contentment. Needs generate motivation and this motivational drive moulds behaviour. The novel *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* elucidates the life of Levi and the various stages of his life. This paper hypothesises the motivational drive that stimulates Levi in fulfilling his needs from the basic ones till he reaches the stage of self-actualization, through the prism of Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs.’

Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’

Abraham Maslow in his paper “A Theory of Human Motivation,” published in *Psychological Review* in 1943, developed the five-level pyramid model describing human conduct. He contends that human needs can be systematized into a hierarchy, as when one need is met, the next need in the hierarchy turns out to be the motivation. Constant motivation will fetch the fruits of success. Through different levels of needs, Maslow elucidates human motivation, behaviour and development in a single framework often known as ‘Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.’

At once other (and ‘higher’) needs to emerge and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still ‘higher’) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency. (Maslow 1943, 375)

When each level is achieved, man gets motivated to reach the next one. It is defined by the requirements that are arranged in a hierarchy of significance with a five-level pyramid, commencing from the physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem needs and progressing towards self-actualization, constructing the way he/she strives to achieve one's goal. Only when one meets the need on one level and gets satisfied, he/she can march to a higher level.

These basic goals are related to each other, being arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency. This means that the most prepotent goal will monopolize consciousness and will tend to organize the recruitment of the various capacities of the organism. The less prepotent needs are minimized, even forgotten or denied. But when a need is fairly well satisfied, the next prepotent ('higher') need emerges, in turn, to dominate the conscious life and to serve as the centre of organization of behaviour, since gratified needs are not active motivators. (Maslow 1943, 394-95)

Application of Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs' on the character Levi

"The 'physiological' needs - the needs that are usually taken as the starting point for the motivation theory are the so-called physiological drives" (Maslow 1943, 372). Physiological needs are the biological prerequisites needed for bodily functions. The primary concern for human survival is the physical well-being and the necessity of some basic, fundamental amenities like food, air and shelter. Abraham Maslow places physiological needs at the bottom, symbolizing it as the basic necessity of life, failing to address which may lead to malnutrition, sickness or possibly death.

Undoubtedly these physiological needs are the most pre-potent of all needs. What this means specifically is, that in the human being who is missing everything in life in an extreme fashion, it is most likely that the major motivation would be the physiological needs rather than any others. (Ibid, 373)

According to Maslow, a person's instinct for survival takes dominance over all other considerations in life until these basic physiological needs are satisfied. In *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* agriculture is given utmost importance and is considered superior to warship too. Levi's mother Vipiano says, "...a household is not worthy of its name if its granaries are empty. ... War is part of a village's life but if we have grain, we can withstand war. If we do not have grain, a

few days of war will overcome us” (Kire 2018, 13). Agriculture and the fieldwork only fetch the grains, which pacifies Levi’s family.

Animism is a belief that certain things have spiritual possessions, and the characters in the novel carry Animistic beliefs. The people tend to protect their fields and the products they get from them to run a family smoothly by paying heed to the animistic beliefs. “They had successfully held the genna to prevent the paddy dying, and another genna to prevent sterility of the soil as well as the genna to ensure the fertility of the soil. It should go well for this year’s harvest, they said to one another” (Ibid, 57). To satisfy their physiological need, they speed up their fieldwork and complete it on time to avoid the lack of food. “In another week, the genna days when no work was permitted would be declared, one each to prevent the field’s failure to bear grain and failure to ripen” (Ibid, 14). Levi too obliges with the same thought when he insists his brother to complete the fieldwork before everything else as his very first duty, as this food is the primary need that majorly aids in the family’s living. “‘Lato, get up, we have to finish the baskets this morning. Mine is almost done. You should try to finish yours’ ... ‘You’re a big boy now, stop sniffing and do a man’s job’” (Ibid, 10).

Following the satisfaction of physiological needs, safety and security are prioritized. A person’s requirement for safety relates to their wish to be shielded from harm, both physically and mentally. “Practically everything looks less important than safety, (even sometimes the physiological needs which being satisfied, are now underestimated). A man, in this state, if it is extreme enough and chronic enough, may be characterized as living almost for safety alone” (Maslow 1943, 376). Humans are naturally inclined to defend themselves against threats. It meant protecting against attackers, natural catastrophes, predators or assaults by rival groups. These requirements entail establishing a secure, predictable atmosphere that lessens fear and anxiety, as well as economic and health stability.

The belief in spirits as a result of Animism is a great concern in the novel. “If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is” (Kire 2018, 50). People fear doing anything wrong, voluntarily or by mistake, as it greatly impacts the safety concerns of the village. “If you break the taboos, you break yourself. ... If you did not heed the taboos, you could live on unharmed for some years...” (Ibid, 14-15). Spirits and the danger they bring have become a major security threat to the village. They not only spoil the harvest but also try to take away the lives of people who cross

the places haunted by them. Levi's uncle once gets prone to it and suffers a lot. He warns Levi of such unclean places, building his knowledge of safety concerns.

'The water spot at Dzünha,' he said with difficulty, 'that place is unclean. I came by it three days ago and when I reached home, I felt the fury of the spirit that I had encountered there. Keep away from Dzünha, son, keep away, the spirits are too strong there' ... 'No, my son, listen. They are not content with causing sickness. They'll not rest till they've taken a life. I saw that in them. That spirits are great and fearless....' (Kire 2018, 59-60)

Levi and his family pay great attention to not forfeit any prohibited act that can lead to their downfall. "...on the decline of the full moon, Terhase would be held, the ritual of making peace with the spirits" (Kire 2018, 14). They properly pay heed to Genna days, chicken sacrificing, and taboo things and intend to maintain a peaceful relationship with the spirits. "... the need for safety is seen as an active and dominant mobilizer of the organism's resources only in emergencies, e.g., war, disease, natural catastrophes, crime waves, societal disorganization, neurosis, brain injury, chronically bad situation" (Maslow 1943, 379). *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* is set amidst certain battles and wars. In Merhü clan - the clan to which Levi belongs, the characters get happy involving themselves in the protection of it and being praised as warriors. "... A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it....' 'That is what drives a man to battle, the need to prove himself worthy of defending his village and his womenfolk, and to earn ornaments....'" (Kire 2018, 8). Levi gets highly motivated by the acts of his ancestors and the words of the clan's elders. He joins hands with his clan members as a budding warrior to protect his mother, his home and his motherland from the rival neighbour clans and the attack of the white men's crew, ensuring his security needs are being fulfilled.

Once people are emotionally and physically secure, they concentrate on forming relationships with their peers. "The love needs -- If both physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge the love and affection and belonging needs..." (Maslow 1943, 380-81) A person's need for connection, consent and interpersonal interactions is referred to as their 'Love and Belonging needs.' These requirements, which include establishing social and

familial ties, are motivated by the psychological aspects of human existence.

Now the person will feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children. He will hunger for affectionate relations with people... He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world and may even forget that once when he was hungry, he sneered at love. (Maslow 1943, 381)

“Kire is conspicuous because her stories advocate core optimism of community values. She promotes communal attachments through the quoted teaching of elders who have moral voices at hand” (Patton 2018, 36). Paying regular visits to ‘Thehou’ - the community house of the clan and spending nights in kichüki - the dormitory make Levi build strong social ties with his fellow age-group members and other senior warriors. “Evenings at the dormitory were exciting times when they exchanged stories and listened to the teachings of the man they called their parent, the elder chosen to be a mentor for their age group. Each age group had a parent and the dormitory was a long bed hewn out of a single log on which ten to fourteen boys could sleep” (Kire 2018, 31). Apart from the parent, everyone else shares their knowledge on some things and lets others observe it. “The boys have so many stories to swap that they never slept early on dormitory nights. Only when it was past midnight did they fall asleep to dream of all the wondrous stories they had been told” (Ibid, 32-33). Learning about the bravery of the ancestors through the oral narratives from the parent and socializing with the clan members by contributing to the concerns and safety of the clan creates a sense of belongingness in Levi.

People who experience love and acceptance are more resilient and self-assured. “Examples of belongingness needs include friendship, intimacy, trust, acceptance, receiving and giving affection, and love” (McLeod 2024). Levi gets Penyü, a great friend for life, from his visits to the dormitory. “...love is not synonymous with sex. Ordinarily, sexual behaviour is multi-determined, ..., determined not only by sexual but also by other needs, chief among which are the love and affection needs” (Maslow 1943, 381). This friendship bond makes both Levi and Penyü stronger together to get moulded as great warriors, fighting for their motherland.

Isolation, sadness and a lack of purpose can be caused by a shortage of connectedness. Levi experiences the phase of isolation during his

prison days of about six years after being captured by the British soldiers for participating in a battle.

The most painful part of the prison was never knowing when they would be freed or if they would ever be freed. Back then, whenever he dreamed of his mother and brother, Levi would be very quiet in the morning. He longed for them so much he feared he would cry in front of the harsh-faced older men. It was almost enough to make him regret that he had chosen to be a warrior. (Kire 2018, 49-50)

Offering and giving love is necessary to reach this level, which promotes emotional stability and happiness. "...love needs involve both giving and receiving love" (Maslow 1943, 381). This advancement of the mind and emotion depends on this stage. After returning from the prison, the warm receiving from his family acts as a medicine for him. "After six years of imprisonment Levi returns home. Vipiano shouts with joy and rushes to him to caress his head" (Deepa and Neeraja 2023, 214). He then focuses only on showcasing his love towards them rather than the thoughts of warriorship. "He felt it was that which made him more of a man than his friends: that dark hardness had grown like a tumour, calloused by years of prison. It had killed something in him" (Kire 2018, 56). The entry of Pelhuvino into Levi's life as his wife revives Levi's spirit and brings him back to normalcy, embracing satisfaction in his need for love and belonging. "The idea of becoming a householder suddenly seemed attractive to him. To be a title-taker like his father and have many sons to carry his name..." (Ibid, 59).

A person's attention turns towards earning respect and self-esteem from others after they feel included and connected, fulfilling the need for love and belongingness. Esteem needs emphasize how important it is to feel appreciated. The need for respect, acknowledgement and self-worth is referred to as 'esteem need'. This stage is fragmented into two parts by Abraham Maslow, such as self-esteem and esteem from others.

These are, first, the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, confidence in the face of the world, and for independence and freedom. Secondly, we have what we may call the desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), recognition, attention, importance or appreciation. (Maslow 1943, 381-82)

Levi's esteem starts growing right from his people speaking of his good conduct, capabilities, reputes and his contributions to the welfare

of the village. Vipiano often praises him for his dutifulness, conduct, and well-mannered behaviour, and blindly trusts his decision, which in turn increases his self-esteem.

She never decided on the household without consulting him. This field, that plot of land, that boundary dispute with their neighbours: these were the things of which she would say with a note of pride in her voice, 'You had better consult Levi. He's the man of the house now.' And Levi did not fail her. (Kire 2018, 111)

Levi's uncle Kovi implants his desire towards achievement and esteem with a few words of motivation and guidance. "... yours is a name that is growing. You are a warrior of Khonoma. People will think twice when they hear your name. So step into your life carefully. Arrogance and pride kill. Be humble, heed the taboos and there is no reason why you should not have a full and long life" (Kire 2018, 53). Levi seeks reverence and validation within the tribal community that values wisdom, potency and adherence to traditions. Even after experiencing six years of prison life and the mental depression he has gone through, Levi readily stands for his clan when his hand is necessary for its well-being.

The preparation for a battle gripped the village. And it ran its course like a fever around the village, this urge to go to war. More and more men spent nights at the hour and the dormitories, mapping out strategies and telling and retelling tales of former victories in battle. Levi was part of it all, soaking it in like a pleasure long abstained from, and all the more delightful therefore. He returned to it as to a former mistress, all thoughts of family flown from him. (Kire 2018, 86)

Being a warrior is a matter of pride among the clansmen. By reviving his warriorship, Levi yearns for his need for esteem from others. "Levi had earned ornaments of war at the battle of Khonoma. He was one of the bravest warriors of Merhü clan" (Kire 2018, 108). His esteem needs bring him to lead the youngsters despite his physical distress due to ageing. Levi's esteem needs manifest in satisfying his obligations as a Naga man in a society where individual accomplishments are intertwined with community recognition. The next level 'self-actualization' is made possible by fostering a sense of competence and purpose through the satisfaction of esteem needs. "Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world" (Maslow 1943, 382). Levi feels himself as an eminent warrior

possessing great strength and potency to lead and rebuild a clan magnificently despite the hardships and also as a good family man running a smooth and successful life, satisfying his esteem needs.

Self-actualization, or reaching one's greatest potential, is at the top of Maslow's hierarchy. The act of attaining personal development, innovation and the realization of one's distinct life mission is known as self-actualization. In contrast to the earlier phases, self-actualization is an internal voyage rather than a quest for survival or approval from others. It is about achieving one's goals, ideals and talents to become the finest version of oneself.

The need for self-actualization -- Even if all needs are satisfied, we may still often (if not always) expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man can be, he must be. This need we may call self-actualization. (Maslow 1943, 382)

In addition to warriorship, Levi builds himself up as a great leader, taking up the role and managing all the crises of the clan with wisdom, bravery and a dedication to protect his community and its cultural identity, showcasing his attainment of self-actualization. "He felt the burden of shouldering clan responsibilities but welcomed it too. He thought to himself, that all his life had been a preparation for shouldering greater and heavier responsibilities" (Kire 2018, 108). Levi admits his younger son Sato to Mission School to take revenge on the white man. But Sato turns out to be his follower and starts believing in Christianity over animistic beliefs. Though this disheartens Levi so much, he never leaves out his spirit and love towards his belief and motherland and strives hard to protect the cultural identity and warriorship. Even on the last day of his life, he goes for hunting with his dearest friend that depicts his bravest self and the heart of a warrior. "He had gotten out of his spear and was beginning to clean the steel. He put it on a sharpening stone and sharpened the head of the spear. 'I'll take my gun too'... He picked up a rag and tied it to a long bamboo, and then he poured oil on the rag and proceeded to shove it down the barrel of the gun" (Ibid, 153).

Self-actualization is a continuous and dynamic process in which people work towards development rather than a particular goal. "It refers to the desire or self-fulfilment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be

phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow 1943, 382). After attaining all the previous four levels, Levi fulfils all his needs to become self-actualized. Levi’s journey as a warrior makes him transform into a role model for many future generations and brings out interest in warriorhood in them. He ensures his community’s legacy and identity by readily taking part in all the rituals, portraying his deep understanding and commitment to Naga culture, and finding that his self-actualization lies more in the collective well-being of the clan than in satisfying all his personal needs.

Conclusion

The protagonist Levi is a representation of one who looks for a greater good, to serve a larger purpose beyond personal goals. Abraham Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ aligns with the life of Levi. “... a healthy man is primarily motivated by his needs to develop and actualize his fullest potentialities and capacities” (Maslow 1943, 394). Levi commences his journey as a healthy man with a focus on meeting all the needs and to achieve self-actualization. “... Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist. He described self-actualization as the process of becoming ‘everything you are capable of becoming’” (Raypole 2020). Levi achieves self-actualization through mentoring others by sharing knowledge and wisdom, and imparting dignity in their identity, remaining as a good son, a lovable husband, a caring father and a dutiful warrior, creating a lasting impact on the community. At the pinnacle of his journey, Levi stands as a figure who rises beyond personal desires to serve for a greater cause with fortitude and resilience. His love for his clan and clansmen ultimately acts as a motivational drive to achieve satisfaction. His climb through Maslow’s ‘Hierarchy of Needs’ emphasizes the concept that genuine fulfilment comes from lending a hand in the legacy and empowerment of an entire clan, in addition to individual accomplishments. Easterine Kire picturises readers with a strong story of leadership, endurance and cultural pride, depicting Levi as a lasting representation of having a self-actualized life by his milieu in the novel *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*.

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