

**Reviving memories of the Naga freedom struggle -A study of *Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire**

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**Abstract**

The paper presents a reading of *Bitter Wormwood*, a novel by Easterine Kire that depicts the Naga freedom struggle from Indian dominance through the eyes of the protagonist Mose. Set in Nagaland, a region in North-eastern India, where the Indigenous Naga people have been fighting for their independence from India for decades, the novel follows Mose's journey as he navigates his way through the complexities of the conflict. The paper attempts to portray Mose's experiences which reflect the larger struggle of the Naga people for self-determination, and the bitterness and disillusionment that come with it. The title of the novel refers to the bitterness that lingers after a struggle for freedom, and the wormwood plant is used as a metaphor for the bitterness that Mose and his community feel towards the Indian government. The paper throws light on how events of the Naga freedom struggle are reconstructed through the memories of the Indigenous people, thus challenging the absence of their history in the meta narrative of the nation, also highlighting the human cost of armed conflict and the importance of seeking peace and reconciliation.

**Keywords:** indigenous, Naga, freedom struggle, north-east, self-determination, memory, Easterine Kire

**Introduction**

“To forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.”- Elie Wiesel

On the eve of 15<sup>th</sup> August 1947 the leader of National Naga Council Angami Zapu Phizo declared independence from the emerging nation state of India. Bertil Lintner, in *Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier*, says that the Naga insurgency was the first in independent India to challenge the 'idea of India'.

Nagaland, home to several Indigenous tribes, with a distinct identity and culture, had been relatively isolated from the rest of India due to its difficult terrain and the lack of connectivity. Like all Indigenous communities, the Nagas too had always viewed themselves as sovereign and did not wish to be a part of the nation state. When the British Raj took control of India, they attempted to exert control over Nagaland, and keep them isolated from the rest of the country on the basis of their distinctiveness. The ILP (Inner Line Permit) was a boundary created by the British, which had to be crossed, with special permission for the mainland people to enter Nagaland; a practice that is followed even in post-colonial times. In *A Nomad Called Thief*, GN Devy talks extensively about the history of marginalisation of the Indigenous people and has expressed how the “tribes have remained trapped in the debris of colonial history which first marked them out as the most rebellious and then labelled them as the most primitive communities.” (Devy 11) After India gained independence from the British Raj in 1947, the Nagas hoped that they too would be granted independence. However, the Indian government refused to grant Nagaland independence and instead incorporated the region into the newly formed Indian nation. This led to widespread protests and resistance from the Naga people, who felt that their right to self-determination was being denied.

The first Naga nationalist organization, the Naga National Council (NNC), was formed in 1946, and it called for the establishment of a separate Naga state. In 1951, the NNC submitted a memorandum to the then Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, demanding a separate state for the Nagas. However, Nehru rejected their demand, and this led to the formation of an armed wing of the NNC, known as the Naga Federal Army (NFA), in 1952. The NFA began a guerrilla campaign against the Indian government, which resulted in several violent clashes. The insurgency in Nagaland has been marked by violence on both sides, and it has had a significant impact on the region's social and economic development. The Indian government has tried to resolve the issue through various means, including negotiations and military action, but a lasting solution has yet to be found.

In 1963, the Indian government created the state of Nagaland, which was seen as a concession to the Naga nationalist movement. However, the NNC rejected this move, and the insurgency continued. In 1975, the Indian government passed the controversial Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), which gave the military sweeping powers to deal with the insurgency. The AFSPA has been criticized by human rights groups, who have accused the military of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings and torture. The act has also been blamed for the worsening of the insurgency, as it has led to resentment among the local population.

The political events of the Nagafight for independence as recorded in history are in a monolithic voice which silences the other side of the story. Literature rewrites history by giving expression to ordinary people's experiences. Literary representation by writers from Nagaland like Easterine Kire and Temsula Ao recreate the narrative of the Naga insurgency by using their literary imagination to delve deeply into the unwritten human experiences of the common people and diligently document the life stories of their people.

### **Easterine Kire**

Easterine Kire, was born in Kohima, Nagaland; she writes primarily in English, and her works include poetry, short stories, novels, and children's literature. Kire's writing is deeply rooted in Naga culture and tradition; her works highlight among other themes, the impact of colonialism, struggles and aspirations of Naga women, and the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and ways of life.

In 1982, she was the first Naga poet in to have her poetry published in English. In 2003, she wrote *A Naga Village Remembered*, the first Naga novel in English. Her second novel was *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) followed by *Mari* (2010) and *Bitter Wormwood* (2011). In 2011 she was awarded the Governor's medal for excellence in Naga literature. Her novel, *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for 'The Hindu Lit for Life' prize in 2013 and in the same year, she received the 'Free Voice' award from Barcelona. In 2016, her novel, *When the River Sleeps* was awarded 'The Hindu Lit for Life' prize. Yet another recent novel, *Son of the Thundercloud* won both the 'Bal Sahitya Puraskar' of the Sahitya Academy and the 2017 'Tata Literature Live Book of the Year' award. Easterine was also the first Naga writer to write books for children. She has recently released her fifth children's book, *The Dancing Village*.

### **Bitter Wormwood**

*Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire, the first Indian English novel on Naga insurgency, set in the war torn Nagaland, spans the years 1937 to 2007 and is about the freedom struggle of the Nagas. The novel provides a detailed account of the various events that transpired during this period, as well as the impact of the struggle on the people of Nagaland. This paper presents a critical study of the novel, with a focus on how the author intends to problematize the historical narrative of the nation on Naga insurgency by bringing to the forefront polysemic voices of the ordinary Naga people. Reviving and reconstructing the past through shared memories is the subaltern's way of writing an alternate history.

In the introduction to the novel Easterine Kire says:

The struggle for independence from India by the Naga people, indigenous inhabitants of the Naga Hills, has been a story hidden for several decades. This book is not meant to be read as a history text book. It is not about the leaders and heroes of Naga struggle. It is about the ordinary people whose lives were completely overturned by the freedom struggle. Because the conflict is not more important than the people who are its victims. (Kire 1)

The novel starts with the protagonist Mose, who is an old man, witnessing a murder in the market of Kohima in the year 2007. This incident leaves him shaken and triggers off a trail of thoughts of the past. Kire uses flashbacks as a technique to revive the memories of the Naga freedom struggle as witnessed from the centre. Unlike the meta narratives of history, this time, central setting where most of the action takes place, is Nagaland and the periphery is the mainland. Nagaland has been viewed as a land of unrest, instability and insurgency from the outside. The author shows agency by relating the story through the eyes of the

protagonist Mose, thus revealing the inside story and the human aspect of the Naga insurgency. The disconnect and the distance, both literal and metaphorical, between the Naga people and the rest of India is evident.

The novel takes us on a journey from the year 1937 when Mose was born to his mother Vilau and father Luo-o. Mose's father died when he went to cut a tree for their rituals. To escape Japanese invasion in 1943, Mose, his mother and grandmother, along with the clans people, seek refuge in another village called Rukhroma. The novel traces this incident through the eyes of Mose, the protagonist of the story. As Mose grows up, his only connection to the outside world is through the radio, especially the news at six pm, which he ritually listens to along with his mother Vilau and his grandmother Khrienuo. The coming of the radio to Kohima village is one of the markers of change, something that connects Mose's family and community to the wider world, something that brings information of the nation and beyond. It is through this that he eventually realizes how the news from his land never makes it to the mainland. News of the violent attack on the peaceful protests against Nagas who decided not to participate in the general elections of 1952 is never mentioned. "...there was nothing on the radio about the empty ballot boxes that were returned from Nagaland. People got to know about it from the few Nagas working in the Government sector. Later it was retold in whispers." (Kire 2011:62-63) Gayatri Spivak uses the term 'subaltern' to refer to the indigenous dispossessed in colonial societies. In her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she concludes that the subaltern has no voice of his own and is always spoken for by those in power. She speaks about 'epistemic violence' inflicted by the intellectual elite when accounts of history leave out subalterns.

The political and historical facts appear in the form of conversation between Mose and his friend Neituo. Their conversations reveal how the Naga struggle for independence did not begin with violence. It began with a faith in talks hoping that their request for a separate Naga nation would be granted. "Father was also saying that the group has gone to meet Gandhi. They will tell him that the Nagas want their own nation." "Oh, then it will be all right. Gandhi is a kind man, isn't he? I'm sure he will agree to it." (503) The assassination of Gandhi, a significant part of political history, relayed by the radio, indicates one of the important events which changed the course of the Naga freedom struggle. The building tension is reflected in the family conversations where the growing presence of army trucks creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. "I came back early because there were a lot of army trucks parked above us on the road...we were afraid of the soldiers. They simply stood on the road and stared at us as we went past them." (556)

Representation in the form of signatures sent by the Naga National Council to the Prime Minister for a free Nagaland indicates the continued presentation of demands in a peaceful manner. Later in the novel, among the papers discovered in Khrienuo's house after her death was a letter addressed to the Simon Commission way back in 1929 asking for a separate homeland. The NNC had written to the British House of Lords before Indian independence and also several letters to the United Nations. Significant events of Naga history that were never made known to the common public are woven in the narrative by

Easterine Kire. She also shows how history is passed down from one generation to another through transfer of memories, thus reviving what the hegemonic powers intended to be forgotten.

Their peaceful protests were met with violent reprisals by the Indian army. Random arrests, beatings, rapes and killings became the order of the day. To register their protest against this inhuman treatment, the Naga people decided not to participate in the general elections that took place in 1952. However, such a major event did not even create a ripple in the mainland as this news was never reported. "Later, there was nothing on the radio about the empty ballot boxes that were returned from Nagaland. People got to know about it from the few Nagas working in the government sector. It was retold in whispers." (642) By not recording the political stand of the Naga people, the hegemonic powers deny them a voice and consequently a presence in the larger politics of the nation. Force was used to compel people to vote in the second election. This created a growing public anger, driving more and more young men underground to take up the path of arms to retaliate against the growing brutality and atrocities committed on Naga civilians by the Indian army.

Mose's grandmother Khrienuo was killed by bullets randomly fired on civilians peacefully cultivating their fields. Though the shooting was documented in the army files, the soldier in question would not face prosecution as he was protected by the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953, which empowered a soldier to "shoot and kill, in case it is felt necessary to do so for maintaining of public order." (728) The seventeen year old Mose's stony face and cold grief at the loss of his grandmother was indicative of his repressed rage, which eventually drives him to join the Naga Underground along with his childhood friend Neituo. The perilous life led by the Underground fighters, their burning desire to fight the injustice against their people and safeguard their ancestral land but at the same time their yearning for home, depicts the human side of the insurgency.

The dismal news that Nagaland was being made into a state in India in 1963 was a shocking news for the Underground. This caused factionalism with a few of them who wanted to go to Kohima and stop the statehood preparation and others who cautioned against taking any action. There was a temporary ceasefire and Mose visited his mother hearing about her illness. Meanwhile he got married to Neilhounuo, known as 'the rifle girl' in the novel, as she was good with guns. The war however did not cease and the casualties kept mounting leaving physical and psychological scars on its victims. Twenty six years since the struggle had begun for Mose, he was disheartened with the new developments like the Naga National Council being outlawed by the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act passed by the Nagaland State Legislative Assembly and the state of the Underground army, where the fight for freedom was reduced to a criminal activity. The newly elected Legislative Assembly of Nagaland in 1974 which drew a visit by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi to Kohima, was a tense event for the civilians. Factionalism among the Nagas make the fight uglier and Mose became a target of warring factions.

Mose in the following years of his life passes the legacy of the fight for freedom to his grandson Neibou who goes to Delhi to study at the Shri Ram College of Commerce,

through various documents and stories. We also get to see the story of Nagaland from the point of view of Neibou's college friend, Himmat's grandfather who was posted in Nagaland. Though the author portrays instances of racism faced by the people of the North-East, through Himmat's grandfather, she also depicts how when some people of the mainland know their story from the inside, they are sympathetic towards their cause. Hence, reviving memories, documenting and sharing them with the outside world becomes very important to mark the presence of a community whose story was never written by the nation.

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