

Bitter Wormwood: A Tale of Struggle and Sufferings of the Naga People

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ABSTRACT

Set against the backdrop of the Naga struggle for independence, Easterine Kire's Bitter Wormwood connects a common man's story to the Naga political history. The novel traces the entire struggle and sufferings of the Nagas through the eyes of Mose, who grows up watching the genocide, starvation, raping of women, burning of villages, fields and granaries and torture by the Indian army and joins the undergrounds at a very young age. After retiring from the underground he tries to lead a normal life. But he suffers more as a retired underground member to see both the brutal killings of his people by the Indian army and the gradual degradation of Naga society caused by factional killings. The burning issue of unequal and inferior treatment given to the people from the North-East by the mainland Indians and the racism they have to face is also addressed in the novel by the author. The novel is not just about the atrocities and violence but also has a hope for a better and peaceful tomorrow through an attempt of finding solutions to this problem. Through the story of Indian soldier Himmat, the author presents the other side of the truth making the novel sound more objective. Kire balances the despair with hope through the friendship of the grandson of the Naga soldier (Mose), Neibuo, and the grandson of the Indian soldier (Himmat), Rakesh and the novel ends on an optimistic note owing to the changing mindset of this new generation which offers a human solution to a political problem.

Keywords: Nagaland, North-East, Naga struggle, Indo-Naga conflict, Factions, Racism

Every story has the right to be heard.
 It is a human right.
 Some stories are more desperate than others
 Because they are trying to shout
 "What we have is not what we want."

These lines from a poem by Easterine Kire rightly project the plight of the North Eastern region of India to which she belongs. India's North-East constitutes Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Manipur. These seven states are popularly termed as 'The Seven Sisters'. This region is geographically isolated from the rest of the country and is largely unknown and mysterious to the mainland. Easterine Kire belongs to Nagaland – a state which is surrounded by Myanmar, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and

Manipur from various sides. Although rich in traditions, culture, natural beauty and serenity, this state is severely affected by the anti-social elements, political radicals, factionalism, military forces, insurgency and misleading policies of the government. The Nagas lament on the fate of their land which hangs between the military and militants. Violence, insurgency, forced displacements, military atrocities, rape etc have destroyed the peace and security of the state. People here live in a perpetual state of fear.

With their conquest in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British incorporated the North Eastern region of India with the rest of India. Till then it was not a part politically and not even administratively of India. So when it was unified, there was a loud outcry, in this mystic region of forests and hills, against this forced merging of their homeland into India. Indigenous tribes in the region, especially Nagaland, longed for a separate nation and wished not to be included in India since they are historically, geographically, culturally and ethnically distinct from Indian mainland. The Nagas have always considered themselves to be an independent nation. "We are Nagas by birth, Indians by accident" (Kumaraswamy, 100) is a common refrain among these indigenous tribal people. Naga Hills were colonized by the British in the 1800s. The Nagas assisted Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army and the Japanese in the war of 1944 in the hope that they might be able to establish self-rule driving the British out as a result of this war. But unfortunately for them, the British won that war and left India three years later ignoring the Naga appeals for independent nation and on their departure, they divided the Naga territories and gave the one half to Burma and the other to India. Unable to identify with the mainland India, Nagas started a struggle for freedom of their homeland. Initially which were peaceful protests turned violent with the increase in state repression and insurgency broke out when the Nagas gradually took arms to fight for independence from the Indian union. The conflict that gave birth to this rebellion is the notion that the Nagas don't want to be a part of India but at the same time they are forced Indian citizens.

Naga fight for independence from the Indian union is not a recent development. The roots of Naga separatism precede India's independence. The Naga Club urged the Simon Commission for their independence as far back as in 1929. But they were turned down and hence what had started as a political movement turned into an insurrection by 1946. After their unwilling inclusion in the Indian union, Nagaland attained fully fledged statehood in 1963. The decision faced opposition from the Nagas as they considered it as the government's imposition of Indian citizenship on them. Easterine Kire highlights this feeling in 'Author's Introduction' to *Bitter Wormwood*:

"Today, many young Nagas struggle with a confused identity. This confusion began after India launched its war of occupation and enacted the creation of Naga statehood in 1963. Statehood was an agreement between a small group of Nagas and the Delhi government. Under statehood, Indian citizenship was imposed on Nagas, but they were denied many of the rights of citizens of India under the Indian constitution. Laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the Disturbed Areas Act took away the fundamental rights of Nagas and continued to put them at the mercy of the armed forces." (4)

NAGA STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE IN *BITTER WORMWOOD*

Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* is an account of the 70 years' Naga freedom struggle. This novel was shortlisted for the prestigious The Hindu Literary Prize. It takes readers deep into the Indo-Naga conflict and introduces them to the unseen and unheard stirring stories of the common people whose lives were affected beyond words. Not only the people who actively indulged in the insurrection but even the innocent people who were not a part of this freedom struggle, underwent a thrashing that left them appalled. The author does not intend to make *Bitter Wormwood* 'a history textbook' (6) or a book about 'the leaders and heroes of the Naga struggle' (6) instead she prefers to make it a story of common people, their lives and the disastrous effects of freedom struggle on their lives. In an interview with Swati Daftuar, she clears:

"*Bitter wormwood* is about real people and their lives. I interviewed several people and used their experiences and insights. I wanted to write a non-stereotypical book about Naga political history and the story of the two grandsons of the two soldiers meeting up and striking up a deep friendship is not untrue. It is also a book that questions political ideologies and their solutions and offers a human solution instead. I am so glad I did that because the characters became real to me in the new manuscript. The two friends Mose and Neituo, with their Angami humour are typical of the men of my tribe. Mose is based on the life of my uncle who was a soldier in the Naga army. As a Naga writer, it has been cathartic to write about the Naga political conflict. It is something that sits deep within most Nagas of my generation and to be able to catharsizes it in fiction has been a great personal liberation." (Daftuar, Swati, 3)

While the entire state is haunted by the evil spirit of violence and turmoil, the title of the novel itself is quite meaningful and apt. Nagas generally use bitter wormwood as a herb to heal cuts, wounds and to safeguard themselves against insect bites. But they also believe that a bitter wormwood leaf tucked behind the ear will keep the evil spirit away and no evil spirit can harm them when they set out into the deep jungles if they have this leaf tucked behind the ear. So Kire, although not literally, uses bitter wormwood as a simple solution to keep away the evil spirit of turbulence from harming her homeland. All the events in the novel are narrated through the life of Moselie, the central character of the novel. He is commonly called as Mose. Moselie means 'one who never plots to harm other person.' The story takes us through Mose's life – first as a teenager, who joins the Naga freedom struggle with his childhood friend Neituo because of extreme brutality faced by his community, and then as a retired underground member. As a teenager he witnesses the oppression of his people by the Indian army but he suffers more as a retired underground member to see both the loss of lives of his people in the hands of the Indian army and the gradual degradation of Naga society caused by factional killings.

Bitter Wormwood opens with a routine affair on the streets of Nagaland – a murder of a young man in the market of Kohima in the year 2007. Mose, the protagonist, who was present at the scene, is pushed aside by the killer on his way to the side-street. The novel jumps back from 2007 to Mose's birth in 1937 to his mother Vilaü and father Luo-o. During the journey, the novel addresses many issues through the life experiences of Mose. The readers are introduced to the stirring side of Naga freedom struggle, the growing hatred among Nagas against Indian

union and its brutal impact on the lives of the common residents of Nagaland through Mose's experience.

Mose's father dies accidentally when he goes to cut a tree for their rituals. Mose is left to live with his widowed mother Vilaü and grandmother Khrienuo in a small village in Nagaland. Mose joins school and at the age of 10, it is on the way to school that Mose heard the phrase 'Naga Independence' for the first time from the people talking on the streets. His first understanding of 'Naga Independence' came from Neituo's explanation that "there is a group of people asking to be separate from India." (42). Like every other Naga, Mose is hopeful that Gandhi will give them the freedom they were demanding. Naga villages were flooded with Indian Army soldiers by the time. The villagers collected signatures and thumbprints in order to demand free Nagaland but it proved to be futile. Curfews became the order of the day. Naga National Council and people organised a march to the Deputy Commissioner's office where the mob was fired bullets at by the police. Mose was present at the sight although at a distance. Young members of Naga community soon started to join the Undergrounds to fight against Indian Army for independence. Mose's school was closed down by an order issued by the District Commissioner and Mose joined the Undergrounds along with Neituo. Kire brings out the rigorous life of the Undergrounds in the jungle through Mose's story. They kept continuously changing their hideouts and keep moving deep into the jungles in order to avoid direct collision with the Indian Army but when captured these members of the Undergrounds were tortured agonizingly to make them confess the names and whereabouts of their fellow members and leaders. The Undergrounds got all the possible support and help from the villagers.

Men readily came forward to replace those fallen in ambushes and encounters. Villagers fled into the forests and many died of starvation. But the survivors were tenacious and had fought on. In all the villages they had entered they had been hailed as heroes, soldiers of the Naga army who the villagers never grudged sharing their meagre food supplies with. (10)

Mose undertook successfully the risky tasks like hoisting the Naga flag at the Kohima Stadium during this time. It is in this period of the jungle years that Mose fell in love with Neilhounuo and they got married. Mose and Neilhounuo give up their Underground operations and lead a normal life like other people after the creation of Nagaland in 1963. All the efforts of Naga people to achieve their freedom from India lost its impetus with the increasing drift between the factions and killings of their own people in the clashes arising out of it.

SUFFERINGS AT THE HANDS OF INDIAN ARMY

The Indian government used its army to suppress the Naga Struggle for Freedom. *Bitter Wormwood* records the brutal torture inflicted by the Indian Army upon Naga villagers. Kire expresses her own experience of surveillance and suppression of the army in an interview:

From 2000-early 2005, I personally experience the stress of living in a house that was stalked by armed ... The brutality of life in Nagaland, especially the brutalization of many young men made me fear for the safety of my children. My older daughter was traumatized on a short trip when their car was stopped and they were held for questioning by a group holding

them at gunpoint. Her sister came within five meters of being shot when armed men began to indiscriminately fire at the human target, felling an innocent citizen. (Daftuar, Swati, 3)

The Nagas suffered a great deal at the hands of the Indian army in the forms of killings of civilians, torture of innocent young men, custodial deaths, rapes of many girls and women, burning of villages etc. There are references to killing of innocent people, burning several Ao and Sema villages and raping women in the novel. Three members of the Naga National Council had been killed and their bodies displayed publicly in the town by the army. Mose's grandmother was a victim of the brutality of the Indian army. The army ransacked people's houses for suspicious documents and tortured them. An instance of brutal beating of the civilians can be sighted from the novel as:

... four men being beaten by the army. The men covered their bleeding heads with their hands but the soldiers continued to rain down blows at them. One man lay unconscious on the ground, but the soldiers did not stop kicking him in the head. (79)

The sad part of it was the torture of innocent common people who were not in any ways connected to the Undergrounds. Villagers were grouped together and starved to death and villages were burnt to cut off the lifeline of the Undergrounds. There was a strong feeling of hatred for the army and police among the Naga villagers.

Rough, lathi-wielding police who didn't hesitate to strike down hard at anybody who looked like they might disturb the law and order. The CRPF had become a deeply hated presence because of the terror tactics they used against the public. Young men, inebriated or not, were regularly picked up by them and beaten until half-dead. The hatred grew and simmered. (128)

The army was given special powers through the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act). The soldiers got the licence to shoot anyone without any trial if they suspect him or her of being harmful. They got protection from being charged by a court of law. According to Neituo, AFSPA is nothing but "just an excuse for the army to kill us [the Naga people]". Some young Nagas who couldn't tolerate the torture by army and CRPF, attacked them and sometimes managed to kill them. But this used to prove even worse for the common people since the army or police tortured and killed many in the reply. A visitor to Mose's shop tells him:

"some of my son's friends got so fed up of them, the way they are so arrogant and keep beating up people on any excuse. One of them used lead pellets in a slingshot which proved quite deadly. It hit a CRPF man out on patrol. Right through his temple. The man died. Since then, they have been on the rampage, looking for any excuse to pick on the locals and beat them senseless". (128)

Common people are caught between the Undergrounds and the army. There is no relief to them. They are either tortured by the army or by the factions of the Underground. People were tired of the killings resulting out of the clashes between the factions. Mose affirms that "Everyone is sick of it, all these killings. But no one has the guts to do anything about it" (9).

The members of factions were killing and terrorising their own people. For them ‘life and death were just games’ (12).

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Thousands of young people from the northeast migrate to mainland India for higher education and jobs. But they face racial discrimination for their Mongoloid looks. It is common for the people from the northeast to be called "chinkies". People from Nagaland are always considered as ‘others’ in their own country. They face what is called an ‘internal racism’. Easterine Kire throws light on this burning issue of racial discrimination faced by Nagas through Mose’s grandson Neibuo, who goes to Delhi for education. Neibuo is disturbed to read that a northeast girl was molested and the police offered no comfort to her. His conversation with Rakesh perfectly epitomises the anger of a northeast person:

“What disgusts me is that we are always alienated and picked on. Today it’s a rape, another day it is a stabbing, how we are expected to believe that we are Indians when all this racism goes on? We are served last in the restaurant and cheated by taxis and autos and even rickshaw pullers. Why do they treat us different from other Indians?”

“But Neibuo, you are not really Indian!” Rakesh burst out, “I mean, it is so clear to me that you are not.”

“I know that. I am Indian on paper because when I fill up a form and they ask for my nationality, I have to write Indian. But many of my North-Eastern friends believe that they are ethnically Indians, and when they meet this kind of treatment, they are so traumatized by it. It is deep-rooted racism and it’s very ugly. The name-calling, the stereotyping of our girls and the way the police refuse to protect the victim, it just makes me feel very hopeless about the rights we have been promised by the Indian constitution. Becoming a state in India didn’t really change anything much. Now we keep encountering maltreatment from the civilian population in place of what we faced earlier at the hands of the army. I doubt things will ever change. In Mumbai, a man attacked and killed a Naga girl. In Pune, five Naga boys were beaten badly by mob. Yet the government still insists we are Indians, and tries to ignore the racism.” (208)

CONCLUSION

Through *Bitter Wormwood*, Kire introduces us to ‘a story hidden for several decades’ – the story of struggle by the Naga people. She uses Mose’s life journey to take us through that period and experience. Kire portrays the struggle and sufferings of her people very poignantly. Her narrative makes the reader sympathise with the characters and hence with all the Naga people at large. But what it also results in is a feeling of disgust for the typical Indian attitude towards the North-East and Nagaland in particular. Kire, very cleverly, plants an Indian soldier’s story posted in the Nagaland and brings forth the other side of the truth. Through Himmat’s story she establishes that even the Indian soldiers have suffered a lot and

that not all the Indian soldiers were against the Naga people – there were a few of them, like Himmat, who did sympathise with the Nagas and appreciated them for their culture and love for the land. The author does not conclude the novel on a tragic or pessimistic note. Instead she offers a human solution to a very critical problem. The novel ends in a new beginning of finding a solution to this gruesome problem through the perspective of new generation. The friendship of the grandson of the Naga soldier (Mose), Neibuo, and the grandson of the Indian soldier (Himmat), Rakesh and their pragmatic approach towards the problem affirms that the novel is not just about the atrocities and violence but it also has a hope for a better and peaceful tomorrow.

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