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“Closing” the Wounds: A Close Reading of Easterine Kire’s *Bitter Wormwood*

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Abstract:

This article reads Easterine Kire’s popular novel about Naga insurgency movement, *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), framed by its metaphorical title. Naga insurgency is the oldest in the Northeast region of India and has shaped the subjectivities of generations of Naga men and women. In this article, Kire’s choice of a metaphor from traditional Naga herbology is used as an interpretive frame to tease out the meaning and objective of the novel. From this exercise, a picture of disillusionment with Naga insurgency and the need to find closure to the collective memory of being subjected to military excesses by the Indian armed forces emerges. Kire’s novel represents an attempt to provide Nagas with an alternative view and attitude towards the not-so-pleasant memory of their past while also exploring new avenues of relationships underpinned by a desire for a mutually respectful co-existence.

Keywords: Naga, Easterine Kire, *Bitter Wormwood*, Northeast India, insurgency.

Introduction

Easterine Kire’s *Bitter Wormwood* (2013: *BW*) is a reflective account of the erosion of the Naga political movement for sovereignty, narrated from the perspective of the protagonist

Mose. It is also a thought experiment in narrative form for finding closure to the wounds of counterinsurgency operations of the Indian state that have festered for too long in collective Naga memory. The general orientation of *BW* lies in the frame title Kire gives it. The metaphoric title – bitter wormwood – is both suggestive of the novel’s objective and a disclaimer of the way in which the herb works to provide a cure. Bitter wormwood is a medicinal plant widely used in traditional Naga culture to heal wounds and other ailments of the gut. It has a bitter taste when ingested and smarts when applied to open wounds. It is also believed that malignant spirits steer away from it – “traditional” Nagas would wear it atop their ears. Conversion to Christianity has not eroded certain traditional beliefs and practices of Nagas. The belief in the “power” of bitter wormwood in matters of the spirit is one such survivor. So, what is the “ailment” that Kire seeks to heal through the mediated narrative of *BW*?

The premise of *BW* is the recognition that Naga psyche has suffered from the decades of armed conflict with India and Myanmar. In due course of time, this has produced a situation in which Nagas appear trapped in a time warp, unable to move forward, as if a malignant spirit has held them hostage against their will. In that sense, *BW* represents Kire’s treatment plan to heal the condition and facilitate a “fresh” start. And in this process, as encapsulated by the title, there is no escaping the “bitterness” if the medicinality of the narrative is to take full effect.

With the above objective in place, Kire pivots the narrative of *BW* on two related themes. The first is factional killings between Naga insurgents on the one hand, and Naga insurgents killing civilians who criticise their “nationalist” activities on the other. Kire traces this regrettable internecine bloodshed to the ideological shifts of Naga rebels in the 1970s. Thus, it is a symptomatic delineation of a trope within the all-encompassing theme of Naga

political movement for self-determination. The second theme relates to the need to shift towards mutual understanding and respect with other Indians of different ethnicities. Pursuing this entails a “positive” retelling of Naga sufferings at the hands of the Indian state to non-Nagas. Retelling it has therapeutic and educational functions. In Kire’s assessment in *BW*, these two themes are intertwined and derive their logic from the gradual erosion of the Naga cause.

Factional Killings

Kire begins the novel with a Prologue set in the year 2007. A tragic incident of factional killing takes place. Mose witnesses this, setting him off on a reflective retracing of Naga insurgency movement that he was part of until the poor health of his widowed mother compelled him to resign from it. In an ironic twist of fate, and after the long disquisition on Naga insurgency movement in narrative form, Mose also meets his end at the hands of armed Naga extortionists while defending a non-Naga – a Bihari shop owner in Kohima. Mose’s untimely death at the hands of his former “comrades” functions as a grim commentary on the degree of erosion of the Naga cause. In this new regime, the “enemy” is ambiguous, and its “identification” is characterised by spontaneity and wilful arbitrariness. The movement has taken on a monstrous form that is unrecognisable – from Mose’s perspective. Kire’s aesthetic choice to open and close the novel with tragedies bespeaks of a lamentation of a noble cause that has strayed too far – perhaps even beyond recall. For if we read the character of Mose allegorically, his tragic death is “self-inflicted” (factionalism) and it cannot be undone. The way forward lies in moving past it.

In the 1950s (and as recounted in the text), the indiscriminate brutalities of the Indian army served as the trigger for Mose to join the Naga underground movement. Of course, these brutalities were contrasted with the inherent right of Nagas to be a sovereign people,

separate from India and Myanmar. Mose justifies his decision thus: “Mother, you do understand that I have to help our people, don’t you? I am going so this will not happen again” (Kire 83). This is similar to Old Man Sashi’s story about his reason for “joining” the underground movement (Ao). Yes, Sashi’s initial contact with the underground group may be termed as “accidental”, but he had the choice to “sign out” of the armed group later and did not. In any case, the early years of Naga revolutionary movement were marked by explicit articulations of the willingness to self-sacrifice. The rhetoric implicit in Mose’s speech to his widowed mother also strips the Indian state of any moral/legal claim to the use of Weberian force, and it elevates resistance to its terror as a righteous duty of every able-bodied Naga.

However, starting in the late 1950s, factions within the Naga movement began to emerge. The first was the Naga People’s Convention (NPC), largely formed by moderate Nagas and those holding professional jobs under the Government of India. The creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963 caused a significant split among Naga revolutionaries. Almost a decade later, the signing of the infamous Shillong Accord in 1975-76 further split the Naga National Council (NNC). The stoic silence of A.Z. Phizo regarding the Shillong Accord, even though he was in England, and the second trip of the NNC cadres to China, during which they were exposed to communist ideology, culminated in a major rebranding of the Naga movement ideologically and organisationally. The National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) was formed by the breakaway members of the NNC in 1980. And in the inhouse quarrel for dominance and legitimacy that ensued, factional killings became inevitable. In the Author’s Note to *BW*, Kire notes this: “Subsequent groups that went to China in the mid-70s were exposed to Chinese Marxist ideology. Factional killings begun by breakaway groups erupted in the Naga National Council in this period, eroding the Naga cause through the years” (3).

In Kire's assessment, factional killings between Naga rebels are symptomatic of the erosion of the movement's core philosophy. It was a new feature of Naga experience that further depleted the support of the people. As Mose's daughter laments: "I mean, we have had the war with India hanging over our heads all our lives. But to have our own men killing each other, and terrorising us is unbearable" (Kire 164). From the passage above, Kire seems to suggest that factional killings began – or "erupted", as it worsened – in the mid-1970s. While it is true that factional killings became more widespread after the creation of the state of Nagaland (1963), it was not entirely a new feature even before that. For instance, T. Sakhrie, a leader of the NNC, was assassinated in 1956 for espousing a view that was considered as deviating from the hardline position of the NNC leadership under Phizo.

At this point in the narrative of *BW*, Nagas who believe in re-steering the movement back to its "original" course are portrayed as running the risk of being killed. The battle for legitimacy and influence on the back of the creation of the state of Nagaland (1963) and the signing of the Shillong Accord (1975-76) vitiated any goodwill effort for reconciliation. The murder of Mayanger in the narrative is a case in point. In Kire's story, Mayanger could have had a comfortable life "in" India due to his education. However, his patriotism led him to choose and serve the Naga cause instead, only to be killed by his own brothers-in-arms for discouraging factional killings (Kire 147).

Mayanger's sacrifice represents Kire's characterisation of the degree of erosion of the movement from within. The moral high ground occupied by Naga revolutionaries in the war with the Indian state is no longer their exclusive preserve. Their willingness to arrogate to themselves the right to use Weberian force against their own people and comrades erodes not just the disciplined rules of engagement that separated them from the Indian armed forces. They have, in fact, imbibed the attributes of their object of disdain to become

indistinguishable from it. This unchecked lapse is further emphasised in the narrative with the example of Mose’s assault by two youths in his shop, who also “brand” him as a “traitor” – for resigning from the underground movement (Kire 139). The generic term “traitor” is loaded and stands for a wide range of specific things: deserter, conspirator, informer, renegade, imposter and so on. However, the semantic word-play during this period stripped the term of specificities and functioned like a code or license for eliminating or socially ostracising anyone branded with it. It assumed the function of a magical word that could provide a cover to all sorts of high-handed conduct without accountability.

To what degree the new reality of internecine warfare between Naga revolutionaries is responsible for Kire’s “nudge” towards peace and mutual co-existence with “India” is hard to tell. But it is not unlike the familiar trope of the gradual subjugation of Nagas by the British in the 19th century. Within a fragmented polity of the precolonial Naga country, the fiercely independent villages were at the mercy of stronger villages. Tributes and expressed loyalties were indispensable currencies for survival. But when the British offered their protection for a fixed amount, many smaller and weaker Naga villages took it. This eventually eased the path to colonial subjugation of the erstwhile Naga Hills (present Nagaland state) by the British (Elwin 124, 176, 178). Likewise, in Kire’s *BW*, it is unclear whether the factional killings between Nagas are one of the several examples that can be said to precipitate the search for a new regime that could end it. In any case, there is an apparent attempt to reconceptualise co-existence and boundaries through the employment of “accidental” friendships.

The Friendship of Neibou and Rakesh

In the narrative of *BW*, the friendship of Neibou (Mose’s grandson) and Rakesh (a Jat) occurred during their time as students of Shri Ram College of Commerce, University of Delhi. Before meeting Rakesh, Neibou is characterised as suffering from a victim mentality

occasioned by the fact of his origin in the political and cultural periphery of India. He faces ragging from the “Indians” and fights back like a wronged man in an alien place. The feeling of alienation is compounded and reinforced by the news and experience of discrimination regularly.

What disgusts me is that we are always alienated and picked on. Today its rape, another day it is a stabbing, how are we expected to believe that we are Indians when all this racism goes on? We are served last in a restaurant and cheated by taxis and autos and even rickshaw pullers. Why do they treat us different from other Indians? (Kire 208).

However, the friendship with Rakesh allows Neibou to shift his stance. Their “accidental” friendship is a key part of the narrative’s plot. It is through this friendship that Kire explores and illustrates the possibility of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. In a sense, Rakesh is “merely” a means to an end in this process because the imputed cultural trauma that interpellates Neibou’s outlook is going to be “healed” by his honest conversations with Rakesh’s grandfather, Himmat, who was posted in Nagaland as an army officer in the 1960s. Himmat’s “counterpoints”, while empathising with the sufferings of Naga people, affords Neibou to find perspective and some sort of closure to his wounds – psychological.

‘The soldiers were very far from their homes. They found themselves fighting an alien culture. You know, the Naga hills are so different from Indian mainland, one has this feeling that you are in a foreign country. Then there was the language barrier too. It is not surprising that the soldiers were seen as an occupying force. There were the usual linguistic misunderstandings between the soldiers and the local population. The soldiers were nervous and trigger-happy. They had been told that the insurgent groups

were experienced and deadly fighters. When you are in fear for your life, you shoot first and ask questions later’ (Kire 205).

Kire’s decision to “balance” the collective memory of Naga experience of the 1950s to the 1980s and beyond represents a shift in narrative frames. What led to this “revisionist” stance from Kire about the period can only be conjectured. But it is undoubtedly a perspective emerging from experience and hindsight (distance and time). Regardless of the historical facts of the recital from both Mose and Himmat, Kire’s narrative is an attempt to confront the collective Naga past using vocabularies outside of victimhood narrative.

Victimhood mentality is usually based on a particular view of history. For a Naga dealing with generational trauma, the Indian establishment is portrayed as the enemy and chief perpetrator of their sufferings. This view also extends to the Indian public as enablers and agents of military excesses. This has led to decades of self-isolation and the cultivation of a general distrust for Indians. Disentangling the actions of the Indian state with the Indian civilian population is seldom attempted, or encouraged, in Naga cultural discourse, until Kire’s present work. In this regard, the friendship between Neibou and Rakesh is an optimistic thought experiment outside the frames of confirmation bias. In this connection, the suggestion of Dipti, Rakesh’s mother, regarding Naga perception of their history is poignant:

‘It’s about learning to let go of the past. I shouldn’t really say so much as I have never experienced the hurt and pain these people have. But I know that if they could deconstruct history, they could create their own solutions’ (Kire 235).

On being negated by Rakesh, citing the great pride Nagas have of their past, Dipti restates her suggestion:

‘I’m just trying to say, in some situations, history kills solutions. So one has to simply push it out. Adapt it. Focus on the present moment, and on the people who are alive today, not those who are dead and gone. Times have changed. People need to stop going on about who did what to who. There is no future in that’ (Kire 236).

Dipti’s perspective on memory and historiography contrasts with the Naga psyche that is saddled with memories of hurt and violence. In a sense, the implied obsession of Nagas with the past – “who did what to whom” – goes beyond the Indian experience. Barring the strange “silence” in Naga collective memory of the British period, the social relations of the fragmented Naga tribes/villages were characterised by generational blood feuds and internecine village warfare. So, such a tendency, as is generally true of all cultures and peoples, characterises the historical situation of Nagas. Psychologically, Dipti’s (and Kire’s) advice presents two approaches to therapy: Freudian, which is past-oriented in diagnosis and treatment, and Victor Frankl’s logotherapy, which is future-oriented and focused on finding a higher meaning and purpose (Kendra; Mcleod; Frankl). Dipti’s view of historiography is closer to Frankl’s logotherapy as it is not so much about “fixing” the past (wrongs) to find a “cure” as transcending the past to find meaning and purpose for the future. The friendship with Rakesh had “prepared” Neibou to receive these honest counterpoints and perspectives in good faith and with a degree of objectivity.

The optimism of *BW* lies in the telling and recognition of the decades of pain and suffering produced by the Indian occupation of Naga homeland. In its therapeutic abstraction, it combines Freudian psychotherapy with Frankl’s logotherapy. The past “wrongs” are recounted and empathised, but how this process unfolds presents a foretaste of what friendship based on mutual trust and affection can do in putting the past in perspective while opening the paths to new relationships and experiences – Neibou’s experience of Jat

hospitality for example. Experience-based perception of each other becomes the chief deconstructor of prejudices in this new temporality.

Conclusion

Literary representations of Naga experience from the 1950s to the 1980s, especially in Temsula Ao and Kire, chronicle the degree and span of Naga suffering. Kire’s emphasis on friendship with “Indians” in *BW* symbolises a shift in Naga perception today. It is a call to transcend the dark memories of the past and reconceptualise the ideas of neighbour and Naga identity in relation to India. The legitimacy of the ongoing Naga political movement is unquestioned per se in this critical appraisal, but it is framed by a critique of the revolutionary ideals that have suffered dilution. The metaphoric function of the title, *Bitter Wormwood*, represents that which is ugly, painful and unpleasant but necessary for healing. And in the context of the narrative, the wounds from the tit-for-tat culture of factionalism cannot heal without confronting the bitter truth of a movement that may have run aground, or much worse, its course.

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