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Review Article

Reimagining Belonging: History, Politics, and Trauma in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire represents a significant contemporary literary figure from Nagaland, whose writings profoundly explore the intricate social, political, and historical contexts of the Naga community. In *Bitter Wormwood*, she delves into the complex intersections of history, politics, and trauma, reconstructing Naga identity through lived experience, memory, and acts of defiance. Employing frameworks derived from postcolonial and trauma theory, especially those articulated by Cathy Caruth and Sanjib Baruah, the novel illustrates the profound impact of historical violence, colonial disruptions, and political marginalisation on the formation of Naga consciousness. Kire's narrative intricately weaves together personal experiences of trauma, creating a shared repository of resilience that connects individual pain to the larger tapestry of communal history. The novel situates the Naga struggle within the broader framework of India's postcolonial nation-building, examining how marginalised histories contest prevailing nationalist narratives. By re-centring marginalised voices, Kire enacts a form of "history from below," demonstrating how literature can function as an alternative space for historiography and healing. Recollection, articulated through narrative, manifests as a vital endeavour for survival and ethical restoration, navigating the intricate interplay among trauma, selfhood, and optimism. This research paper examines the representation of personal and collective trauma in Bitter Wormwood, the reconstruction of Naga identity, and the role of literature in safeguarding subaltern histories.

Keywords: Trauma Theory, Postcolonial Literature, Easterine Kire, Naga Identity, Collective Memory.

INTRODUCTION

History in literature transcends mere backdrop; it encompasses events, political movements, colonisation, wars, and social transformations. As John Brannigan argues, literatures must be understood as "constitutive and inseparable parts of history… rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions, of history" (Brannigan 170). Viewed through this lens, Easterine Kire's fiction operates simultaneously as historical witness and critical intervention. Widely regarded as one of the most significant literary voices from Nagaland, Kire articulates the cultural, political, and emotional realities of Naga life with remarkable clarity. Her debut novel, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), later republished as *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2018), is recognised as the first English novel by a Naga author. Over the years, she has produced an extensive body of work spanning poetry, short stories, novels, children's literature, and translations from Tenyidie into English. Her notable works include *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017), *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* (2018), *A Respectable Woman* (2019), *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland* (2019), and *Spirit Nights* (2022). In 2004, she received the Sahitya Akademi Award in English for her contribution to Indian literature and her engagement with Naga oral traditions.

The intersection of history, politics, and trauma in *Bitter Wormwood* profoundly shapes both individual and collective Naga consciousness. The novel foregrounds the effects of colonial domination, political marginalisation, and cultural disruption, producing an identity marked equally by suffering and resilience. Although fictional, Kire's narrative functions as an ethical archive of memory, bridging historical events and lived experience. Within postcolonial Indian literature, voices from the Northeast have frequently been overshadowed by dominant nationalist discourses;

Kire's work reclaims this marginalised space by foregrounding the psychological and cultural consequences of militarisation and historical erasure.

Through the character of Mose, an ordinary man caught in extraordinary circumstances, the novel embodies the broader historical trauma of Nagaland, shaped by colonial encounters, insurgency, and the continued enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). These forces continually redefine the contours of identity and belonging. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a "wound of the mind" transmitted through language and memory (Caruth 3), this paper examines the ethics of remembrance in *Bitter Wormwood*. For the Naga community, remembering is not merely retrospective but also reparative: it reconstructs a fragmented past to sustain cultural identity, moral continuity, and collective dignity.

Objectives of the study:

The researcher has formulated the following objectives for the study.

1. To investigate how *Bitter Wormwood* re-narrates the political and historical evolution of Naga identity through the everyday lives of its characters.
2. To analyse the role of trauma—personal, collective, and inherited—in shaping the moral and psychological landscape of Kire's narrative.
3. To demonstrate how Kire's fiction enacts "history from below," democratizing historiography by privileging subaltern and domestic voices over official state records.

Methodology of the Study:

This study undertakes a qualitative literary analysis of Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) as the primary text. Secondary data is drawn from a range of theoretical and critical writings in trauma studies, postcolonial theory, historiography, and ethnic studies. The methodological framework is informed by interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that address the interconnections among history, memory, trauma, and identity, and is further shaped by a "history from below" approach that foregrounds marginalised and lived experiences within literary representation.

The analysis employs close textual reading, focusing on narrative structure, imagery, and characterisation to examine how political violence and historical trauma shape collective identity. Historical contextualisation is integral to the study; therefore, colonial records, political histories of Nagaland, and relevant critical scholarship are used to situate the novel within its socio-political context. By integrating literary analysis with historical and ethnographic perspectives, the study explores how storytelling functions as a mediating space between trauma and resilience in postcolonial Northeast India.

Bottom of Form

Discussion and Analysis:

Colonial Histories and the Rewriting of Space

Kire's fiction unfolds within a geography marked by violence and transformation shaped by colonial and postcolonial interventions. Colonial engagement with the Naga Hills began with British military expeditions in the nineteenth century, followed by administrative incorporation, which disrupted indigenous systems of land, governance, and mobility. These interventions imposed new spatial and political boundaries that redefined tribal autonomy, converting once self-regulated village landscapes into surveyed and regulated territories. As Sanjib Baruah observes, colonial administration in Northeast India erected "new spatial and political boundaries that redefined tribal autonomy" (16), laying the foundation for later militarisation and conflict.

In *Bitter Wormwood*, the remnants of these colonial "fences and walls" persist as psychological and cultural barriers within Naga society. British and later Indian political interventions transform the landscape into a contested site—both materially and symbolically. Baruah's concept of "writing on the ground" (17) resonates strongly with Kire's portrayal of Nagaland as a space overwritten by successive regimes of power. When Mose recalls his childhood during the Japanese invasion and the subsequent insurgency, his fragmented memories mirror the fractured political terrain of his homeland. Repeated experiences of displacement—villages burned, people fleeing through forests—reflect the long history of spatial disruption initiated under colonial rule and intensified in the postcolonial period. Kire's narrative thus challenges the "colonial way of seeing" (Baruah 17) by re-inscribing the Naga landscape with emotional and cultural depth. The hills, forests, and markets of Kohima emerge as living archives of pain, memory, and survival. Through storytelling, Kire reclaims space as a site of indigenous memory, transforming geography into history and literature into testimony.

Trauma, Memory, and the Ethics of Remembrance

In *Bitter Wormwood*, trauma emerges not as a singular event but as an accumulated historical condition shaped by prolonged conflict, militarisation, and political uncertainty. The violence experienced by the Naga people—colonial incursions, wartime devastation, insurgency, and the enforcement of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)—produces a form of collective trauma that permeates everyday life. These experiences are not confined to the past; rather, they recur through memory, silence, and repetition, shaping both individual subjectivity and communal consciousness. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly

Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as a "wound of the mind" that resists immediate comprehension and returns through fragmented memory (Caruth 3), Kire's narrative foregrounds the delayed and indirect expression of suffering. Mose's recollections are marked by gaps, sudden images, and emotional dissonance, reflecting the psychological rupture caused by sustained exposure to violence. His memories of burned villages, arbitrary arrests, and forced movement through forests are not presented as linear history but as intrusive fragments that surface unexpectedly, mirroring the workings of traumatic memory. Kire also highlights how trauma is transmitted intergenerationally through storytelling and silence. For the Naga community, remembering is not merely an act of recalling the past but a moral responsibility to bear witness to suffering that has been historically denied or erased. As Temsula Ao observes, memory is selective, preserving certain experiences while suppressing others; yet in conflict zones, even suppressed memories continue to shape identity and behaviour. Kire's fiction resists this erasure by transforming personal recollections into narrative testimony, allowing private pain to enter the public realm of history.

Through this ethics of remembrance, *Bitter Wormwood* challenges dominant historiographies that reduce the Naga struggle to political statistics or insurgent activity. Instead, it centres lived experience, foregrounding fear, loss, and endurance as integral components of historical understanding. Trauma, in Kire's narrative, thus becomes both a source of suffering and a site of resistance—where memory sustains cultural identity and asserts the right to narrate one's own history.

History from Below: The Politics of Everyday Life

Easterine Kire's significant contribution to Naga literature lies in her recovery of history from the perspective of the marginalised. Drawing upon E. P. Thompson's concept of "history from below" prompts Kire to shift attention away from official narratives of leaders, wars, and political negotiations, foregrounding the lived experiences of ordinary people. In her introduction to *Bitter Wormwood*, she clarifies that the novel is "not meant to be read as a history textbook… because the victims matter more than the conflict" (6). This assertion establishes Kire's commitment to an alternative historiography that privileges human suffering and everyday survival over abstract political chronology. This historiographical stance democratises the act of remembering by locating history within domestic routines, emotional labour, and ordinary spaces. By chronicling the daily anxieties, interrupted childhoods, and fragile rhythms of family life in Kohima, Kire redefines resistance as the persistence of ordinary existence under extraordinary conditions of violence and uncertainty. Female-headed households—particularly figures such as Mose's mother and grandmother—emerge as crucial sites of continuity, preserving ethical values, cultural memory, and social stability amid insurgency, militarisation, and loss. Their quiet endurance challenges masculinist and militarised narratives of resistance, foregrounding care, resilience, and moral responsibility as political acts.

As Longkumer observes, Kire's fiction "documents the history of the Nagas by focusing on their daily lived experiences" (87). This ethnographic attentiveness counters state-centred historiography, which frequently renders peripheral regions and non-combatant lives invisible. In *Bitter Wormwood*, spaces such as the home, kitchen, church, and market function as microcosms of Naga survival, where fear, scarcity, and hope intersect. The ordinariness of these spaces resists political abstraction, insisting that history is lived not only on battlefields but within domestic and communal spheres.

Kire's narrative strategy is thus both literary and political. By foregrounding Naga voices and everyday experiences, her work performs what Gayatri Spivak terms "strategic essentialism," asserting an indigenous perspective to counter epistemic erasure while remaining attentive to the constructed nature of representation. Politics in *Bitter Wormwood* permeates domestic life, and resistance ultimately takes the form of storytelling itself—where remembering, narrating, and enduring become acts of historical agency.

The Intersection of Faith, Culture, and Politics

Another crucial dimension of *Bitter Wormwood* is its exploration of religious and cultural syncretism—the coexistence of Christianity and indigenous spiritual practices within Naga society. The protagonist Mose inhabits a hybrid religious world: he prays to "Jisu" in a Catholic school while continuing to observe traditional rituals such as "Genna Day" (BW 37). This simultaneous engagement with Christian and indigenous belief systems reflects what Homi Bhabha describes as a "third space" of cultural negotiation, where identity is neither fixed nor singular but continuously reconstituted through interaction and adaptation. For the Naga community, Christianity served as both a source of solace and a form of moral discipline during colonial rule. Missionary education introduced literacy, new ethical frameworks, and institutional structures, while also reshaping indigenous notions of community and authority. Kire neither idealises nor rejects this transformation; instead, she depicts Christianity as a lived and localised practice, reinterpreted through oral tradition, ancestral memory, and everyday experience. Faith in Bitter Wormwood thus emerges not as an imposed doctrine but as a negotiated cultural form that coexists with older spiritual beliefs.

The motif of the "bitter wormwood," a plant believed to ward off evil spirits, powerfully encapsulates this syncretism. When Mose's mother asks, "Who is

there to protect us from all these evils?" (BW 69), her question collapses the boundary between the metaphysical and the political, equating spiritual threat with the violence of militarisation. The plant's bitterness signifies endurance, vigilance, and moral resistance. Through this symbol, Kire intertwines faith and politics, transforming prayer into an act of quiet defiance and belief into a strategy of psychological survival.

The Naga identity that emerges from this syncretic framework is neither purely Christian nor wholly indigenous; rather, it is a hybrid formation shaped by colonial encounter, cultural adaptation, and political struggle. In Bitter Wormwood, faith becomes a site of negotiation where cultural continuity is preserved even as new meanings are forged, allowing spiritual practice to function as both refuge and resistance in the face of historical trauma.

Violence, Resistance, and the Ethics of Memory

The history of Nagaland, as reflected in *Bitter Wormwood*, cannot be disentangled from violence. From the Japanese invasion to insurgent warfare and state militarisation, violence becomes a structural reality shaping both body and mind. Yet Kire's narrative refrains from sensationalising brutality; rather, she explores its moral and emotional reverberations. The murder of Mose's grandmother— "The bullet that had entered the back of her head had killed her" (BW 70)—functions as both a literal and a symbolic act: it annihilates familial security while engraving trauma into communal consciousness. Under the shadow of AFSPA, ordinary civilians endure humiliation, displacement, and loss. This militarised environment, as Baruah explains, perpetuates "the colonial legacy of internal frontiers" (17). The persistence of such policies underscores how colonial structures continue to govern the postcolonial state. Kire converts this political violence into an ethical inquiry. Mose's confession— "Shooting someone from your village… that nearly killed me" (BW 99)—reveals the inner corrosion caused by conflict. His emotional numbness is not apathy but survival; his silence testifies to the moral fatigue of endless war. Through him, Kire humanises insurgency, depicting combatants not as ideologues but as victims of history. This portrayal aligns with Caruth's claim that trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (4). The delayed articulation of pain in *Bitter Wormwood* signifies a communal inability to process continuous loss. Yet, paradoxically, remembering becomes an act of ethical resistance. By confronting pain rather than suppressing it, Kire transforms trauma into narrative agency—a means to reclaim history from the margins.

The figure of the female storyteller reinforces this transformation. Women like Mose's mother and grandmother sustain oral traditions that convert grief into collective wisdom. Their domestic spaces—where food is shared, stories told, and prayers offered—become sanctuaries of healing. As Kire herself notes, "The victims matter more than the conflict" (6). By privileging the domestic over the martial, she subverts patriarchal and nationalist valorisation of war. In the final act of the novel, Mose's death defending a Bihari shopkeeper marks a moral evolution: from ethnic loyalty to universal compassion. The merchant's final address—calling Mose "baba" (BW 224)—signifies reconciliation across historical boundaries. This ending enacts what Paul Ricoeur terms the "ethics of memory," where remembrance serves justice rather than vengeance. Kire thus elevates memory from personal grief to moral philosophy: the past must be remembered not to perpetuate hatred but to reimagine coexistence.

Literature as Historiography and Healing

Kire's fiction exemplifies how literature performs historiographical work. Alan Robinson argues that humans "deal with temporal dislocation by seeking to preserve, retrieve, reinterpret, or appropriate past experience" (4). In this sense, *Bitter Wormwood* functions as an alternative archive—a literary reconstruction of Naga history that official narratives neglect. Through storytelling, Kire repairs the rupture between collective memory and recorded history. Her characters embody what Jelle Wouters calls "historically contingent, constructed, and continually debated" identity (38). The novel's structure—nonlinear, episodic, grounded in recollection—mirrors the fragmented process of remembering itself. Each story told by elders, each song sung during mourning, acts as a cultural mechanism for transmitting history. E. P. Thompson's vision of "history from below" finds powerful realisation here. By embedding grand historical events—World War II, insurgency, AFSPA—within everyday experience, Kire converts marginalised memory into historical agency. Her fiction documents how ordinary people sustain meaning amid dislocation, making narrative an instrument of both record and redemption. Moreover, *Bitter Wormwood* participates in a global discourse of trauma literature, echoing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in its portrayal of colonised communities reclaiming identity through narrative. Like Morrison, Kire transforms memory into moral reconstruction; like Achebe, she restores indigenous dignity through language.

The Reconstitution of Identity through Trauma

Trauma in *Bitter Wormwood* is not an endpoint but a generative force. It constructs identity through the dialectic of loss and recovery. The Naga sense of self emerges not from static ethnicity but from continuous negotiation between history, suffering, and hope. As Caruth contends, trauma "connects individual and collective histories through the act of listening to the other's wound" (8). Kire's narrative listens—to the silenced, to the forgotten, to those whose pain defies expression. Her fictional world becomes a communal therapy session where memory is shared to reconstitute

belonging. The intergenerational aspect of trauma is crucial. Mose inherits his ancestors' dislocation and transmits it through silence and endurance. This continuity transforms trauma into cultural DNA, carried through storytelling and ritual. In reimagining this inheritance, Kire affirms that survival is itself a form of resistance.

Her blending of oral tradition with modern prose reflects this continuity. Storytelling, once confined to village firesides, now enters global literature, enabling the Naga voice to claim visibility. The transformation of private suffering into public narrative ensures that trauma, though persistent, becomes productive—redefining identity as a moral stance rather than a political label.

CONCLUSION

Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* weaves together history, politics, and trauma to reconstruct Naga identity from within. Through the lens of trauma theory and postcolonial historiography, the novel exposes how colonial and postcolonial violence, insurgency, and alienation shape collective consciousness. Yet it also reveals the moral strength embedded in remembrance. Kire's portrayal of everyday life—its domestic tenderness amid turmoil—constitutes a counter-narrative to state-centred history. By re-centring subaltern experience, she transforms fiction into an archive of resistance. The trauma that haunts her characters does not annihilate meaning; it generates a language of empathy that bridges ethnic, moral, and historical divides. Ultimately, *Bitter Wormwood* teaches that history is not a fixed chronicle but a living memory carried by voices that refuse to be erased. The Naga story, as told through Kire's humanistic lens, becomes an allegory for all marginalised communities struggling to reconcile past wounds with future hope. Remembering, in her vision, is both a duty and a redemption—an act through which pain becomes witness, and witness becomes the foundation of identity.

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