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## **Silence as Testimony: Trauma, Ethical Witnessing, and Indigenous Counter-Histories in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood***

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### Abstract

The paper *Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire plays a central role in the modern literature of the Indian English world because of its delicate and ethically based portrayal of the Indo-Naga war. The novel tells the story of the everyday life of common villagers whose life is disrupted by militarization, fear and loss rather than predicting armed opposition or political ideology. This paper discusses *Bitter Wormwood* as a story of trauma that expresses indigenous memory and ethical witnessing in silence, domestic spaces and sharing of stories. It is based on the theory of trauma, postcolonial indigenous studies, and narrative ethics to argue that Kire novel can be seen as a counter-historical archive, disputing state-centric historiography, and the restoration of unheard voices. Focusing on women and non-combatants as the keepers of memory, *Bitter Wormwood* refutes the concept of heroism and resistance as the mode of survival, nursing, and memory. The paper has a contribution to the scholarship of the Northeast Indian literature; it places the work of Kire within a context of ethical intervention to conserve the indigenous epistemologies and to make literature a place of cultural survival.

**Keywords:** Easterine Kire, Bitter Wormwood, Naga literature, trauma narrative, aboriginal memory, militarization, Ethical witnessing.

Historically, the literature of Indian English has been characterized by stories that are created out of the metropolitan and mainland contexts and disregards the voices of people in the northeastern part of the nation. Northeast India is a region whose literature has never had a critical presence until recently due to colonial experiences, ethnicity, political instability, and cultural plurality. Among the new collections of writing, Easterine Kire is an important literary voice recording the Naga history, memory, and cultural survival by writing fiction based on indigenous experience. *The Bitter Wormwood* by Kire is placed within the context of the Indo-Naga political struggle, a political tussle that has had an immense impact on the civilian life of Nagaland.

Nevertheless, contrary to traditional political or war fiction, the novel is not about feats of arms or war speech. Rather, it concentrates on the emotional and psychological effects of the conflict on

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women, children, and old people who are characterized by uncertainty, fear, and silence. The strength of the novel is that it does not focus on sensationalizing violence but rather on showing how normalcy is being destroyed gradually through militarization.

The paper supports the idea that *Bitter Wormwood* is a native trauma story and a counter-history that disrupts the official accounts of war. The foregrounding of daily life, the communal memory, and the bear witnessing of morality by Kire are reinstating the practice of telling stories as a way of survival as a culture and as a way of being responsible. The research paper aims at investigating the representations of trauma in silence and how women have become the custodians of memory and how indigenous narratives have resisted historical erasure.

One of the most popular contemporary Nagaland writers and one of the pioneers of Nagaland writing in English is Easterine Kire. Throughout her literary career she is characterized by a period of active exploration of Naga history, oral traditions, spirituality and indigenous cosmology. Since she is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Kire has been very instrumental in introducing the masses to the literary discussions of a marginalized region that has historically existed at the periphery of mainstream literature. Kire has always predicted mundane lives in his fiction, not the political elite or militant leaders.

Her plots are grounded in the life of the communities since storytelling plays the role of remembering, healing, and resistance. Naga novels like *A Naga Village Remembered*, *Mari*, *When the River Sleeps* and *Bitter Wormwood* recount history using personal and collective recollection challenging the mainstream historical archives which in most cases suppresses indigenous voices. The authorial intrusion of Kire is especially noticed in *Bitter Wormwood* in the manner she dealt with conflict ethically. She does not write as a historian of political events, but a moral witness to suffering. The epistemology of restraint, silence, and shared memory, rather than spectacle and challenge, is reflected in her narrative approach, which is indigenous in nature.

Northeast Indian literature has been subjected to critical attention over the last few years, with issues of identity, marginalization and political unrest being the focus. The way in which regional writers confront mainstream narratives and recover cultural particularity has been looked at by scholars. The works on Easterine Kire have drawn attention to her application of oral tradition, spiritual symbolism as well as community-based storytelling.

Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have stressed that trauma could be rather difficult to articulate, and it could be reflected in terms of silence, repetition, and fragmented memory. Postcolonial critics have applied the theory of trauma to explore the way colonial, and postcolonial violence informs the collective memory of the marginalized communities. Nevertheless, although the wider contribution of Kire has been discussed, *Bitter Wormwood* still has not been explored thoroughly as indigenous trauma-focused counter-history. The criticism that exists tends to place the novel in the context of politics with a lack of adequate focus on the narrative ethics and everyday trauma portrayal.

This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a long-term discussion of the novel using the trauma theory and indigenous studies. This paper applies to a qualitative design that relies on a close textual analysis and interpretive literary criticism. This study is based on an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, which combines the theory of trauma, postcolonial indigenous studies, and narrative ethics. The theory of trauma will offer methods of examining the depiction of suffering as an indirect form of suffering in terms of silence and memory. The postcolonial indigenous studies aid in the contextualization of the novel in the context of history of marginalization and resistance. Narrative ethics allows exploring storytelling as a moral act which has responsibility to the represented community.

Another one of the most vivid features of *Bitter Wormwood* is militarization as a force that penetrates the normal life. The army, surveillance, and fear are introduced into the domestic scene and routines that were used to characterize the life in the villages are broken. Kire describes how normal people live, cooking, walking, taking care of the children, but everything is covered with the threat of violence.

Instead of showing over violence, the novel focuses on psychological distress. The element of fear becomes constant, and it forms behavior and relationships. This storytelling decision is an indication of reality on the ground as civilians; war is not a one-time occurrence but something that they experience. The role of women in *Bitter Wormwood* is a key focus since women appear as the source of emotion and as the guardians of memory. The female characters of Kire do tolerate loss, and carry emotional burden of the conflict, maintaining family and community life. Their perseverance is not pronounced with direct opposition but by nurturance, perseverance, and memory.

Such representation goes against the conventional thinking of heroism as a conflict story. Silence is not being passive but a survival mechanism that the women have developed because of the trauma. By them, Kire pre-empts an ethic of care that will serve as resistance to dehumanization. As a key narrative device in Easterine Kire, the silent works as the medium of *Bitter Wormwood*, which influences the theme of the book and its moralism. Instead of describing trauma in descriptive language, Kire uses narrative restraint to tell of the inability to express the suffering.

Traumatic experience, according to Cathy Caruth, the theorist of trauma, tends to surpass the boundaries of language since it is usually difficult to convey directly. This state is reflected in Kire prose which gives the emotional burden of loss and fear to silence, pauses, and gaps in the narratives. The agony of *Bitter Wormwood* is often expressed in what is not stated. Grief, shock, and despair are not accompanied by theatrics, but subdued reactions, omissions, and ellipses. This is a non-sensational approach to violence but rather an ethical approach of suffering.

Through non-disclosure, Kire challenges the readers to engage with the emotionality of trauma without becoming consumers of the spectacle, but to think about it. Another example of silence in the novel is a survival mechanism which was formed through long term militarization. Speech is a way of self-defense, and characters are taught to avoid saying things that can bring harm to an environment where words are a form of self-defense. This imposed silence shows that political violence permeates even the deepest corners of life, and controls not just physical movement, but also the manifestation of emotions. Silence therefore becomes the indicator of mental trauma and social restraint.

Further, the silence used by Kire is closely associated with the traditions of native storytelling in which the meaning is not expressed directly but indirectly. Silence in Naga oral culture is not no communication but the time to think about something, to show respect and to remember. In choosing this narrative form, Kire confirms indigenous epistemologies in which suggestion is more desirable than declaration and memory more important than documentation. Finally, in *Bitter Wormwood* silence turns into a memory and moral place. It does not lose the dignity of suffering, and it is permitting the trauma to be recognized without uttering it completely. An excellent example provided by Kire in this narrative technique is that silence becomes a potent means of testimony which the novel vigorously serves as an ethical and indigenous counter-narrative to mainstream histories of antagonism.

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire creates a different historical account, which questions the prevailing, state-focused Beta versions of the Indo-Naga war. The official historiography in most cases favours the politics of negotiation, military campaigns, and nationalistic talk thus sidelining the experiences of the indigenous civilians. The novel Kire presents is in opposition to such exclusions, it indigenizes indigenous memory that is based on oral testimony, personal recollection and shared stories.

In lieu of providing the historical record as a recollection or a chronological narrative, *Bitter Wormwood* constructs history as a subjective experience. The story favors the ordinary voices of women, elderly and children whose plight is seldom recorded in the history books. The novel captures fear, loss, and displacement as permanent realities of conflict through their memories. Those memories can be described as what could be called a “counter-archive” that holds onto experiences that are often reacted to by institutional histories.

The novel includes indigenous memory which is passed on mainly through oral stories and collective memories. Storytelling is a cultural act whereby the traumatic experience is recognized without sensationalizing it. This aural form of memory is consistent with Naga epistemologies, in which history is perpetuated by oral retelling as opposed to record keeping. Kire reaffirms the indigenous mode of knowing by installing memory on the domestic and communal spaces that oppose the colonial and postcolonial formations of historical representations.

The act of communal memory preservation in *Bitter Wormwood* is another form of cultural survival. When one remembers, this would be a way of fighting against erasure, and the community is able to preserve its identity despite the long history of militarization. The concept of private grief being shared in the form of storytelling is turned into shared memory, which allows one to heal and move on. The novel in this sense sees to it that the histories of indigenous people last even at the time when the histories are silenced through violence and political marginalisation.

Therefore, *Bitter Wormwood* changes the whole idea of historiography, turning it into something moral rather than official. The narrative by Kire asserts that emotional truth and human suffering must be considered in history making indigenous memory a significant legitimate source of history. Silence is a very important thematic and narrative device in *Bitter Wormwood*. In the theory of trauma, formulated by Caruth, the trauma is frequently inexplicable, and that is what Kire attempts to capture careful prose. The conveying of the pain is made through the unsaid, with pauses and omissions that lead the reader into an ethical response to suffering.

Such narrative restraint can be expected in indigenous storytelling, in which meaning is, in many cases, implicitly expressed. Silence is therefore a memory and reflective space and not an absence. Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* is a counter-historical archive, which questions official accounts of the Indo-Naga war. The novel opposes the state-centric historiography, which tends to deny civilian victims as oral memory and personal testimony privilege, lacks.

Social survival in the form of saving communal memory is made into a cultural defense. By narrating stories, personal sorrow is converted into a shared memory, which means the indigenous past is not erased. In the analysis, *Bitter Wormwood* is found to be trauma in the form of ordinary life and not spectacle, it places women as moral observers, and it uses silence as a form of narration. All these together make the novel an indigenous counter-history that opposes erasure and confirm the identity.

The book *Bitter Wormwood* by Easterine Kire is a strong literary intervention defining the image of conflict in Indian English literature. Trauma can be turned into ethical witnessing by focusing on everyday life and silence, as well as communal memory, through which the novel is constructed. This paper illustrates that *Bitter Wormwood* is not only a political fiction but also an indigenous archive that holds on to marginalized histories and rediscovered storytelling as an ethical duty.

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