

A STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA IN KIRE'S BITTER WORMWOOD

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Abstract

North-East India has been an area which has been prone to violence and conflict for the past many years. This turmoil and bloodshed has ruined the lives of countless of inhabitants of this region. Therefore, the focus of this paper is the novel Bitter wormwood by Easterine Kire which traces the Naga conflict from its inception to the present day. It tries to underline the ramifications of such mindless violence which results in unbearable trauma and a heavy sense of loss. It highlights the fact that violence can beget only violence and how it becomes a vicious circle which engulfs all including the innocent and the faultless.

Key words: Literature from North-East India, violence and trauma, pain and conflict.

The North-East region of India has been grappling with Violence and trauma for more than half a century. It has been ravaged by violence linked with insurgency, ethnic clashes and other related issues. For the inhabitants of this area the violence is a part and parcel of their everyday lives and there is no escape from it. Almost all the states of this region are affected by this engulfing fire of violence, the only exception being Sikkim and a few other states. For the whole world the North-East is one of the conflict zones of India, it is a chapter in the glorious history of India which nobody would want to read and comprehend. This region was once a peaceful haven for the people inhabiting it but with the passage of time things changed drastically and in the modern age it has become a hot spot for violence and turmoil.

This Paper will focus on the consequences of violence caused by the Naga Conflict, how it has destroyed the lives of the folks of this region. It will highlight the trauma that the Nagas had to undergo because of the constant Violence and bloodshed.

But before delving deeper into the topic one has to understand the background of the Naga Conflict. The Naga rebellion also termed as the 'mother of all insurgencies of the North-East', began in the mid-forties of the last century. According to Goswami, the conflict originally started with the creation of the Naga National Council (NNC) spearheaded by A.Z.Phizo. In the year when India got its independence from the British rule the NNC also

declared its independence on 14th of August 1947. The idea of Naga sovereignty was further propagated with a Naga plebiscite organised on 16th may 1951. The movement climaxing in 1956 became an armed ethnic conflict which aimed for the secession of Naga territories from India. The radical sectors of NNC created the Federal Government of Nagaland (FGN) which also included an underground Naga army (43-48).

In his book *Nehru*, Benjamin Zachariah states that, “It was in the north-east of India that the Nehruvian vision took on its most brutal and violent forms.” The actions of mass murder and rape by the Indian defence forces could not endear to the Nagas a sense of belonging with the Indian nation. It ended in the formation of a new Naga state within the Indian Union, conceded in 1960 and inaugurated in 1963 (283). On November 11, 1975 an agreement known as the Shillong Accord was signed between the Centre and a section of the NNC and the NFG. According to the terms of it, the NNC-NFG accepted the Indian Constitution and agreed to surrender their weapons. However, a group led by Thuengaling Muivah, Isak Chisi Swu and SS Khaplang, rejected the Shillong Accord and refused to surrender and formed another group called as National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN). A violent clash in 1988 resulted in the split of NSCN into NSCN Isak and Muivah (I-M) and NSCN Khaplang (K). After Phizo died in London in 1991 the NNC began to fade away and the NSCN (I-M) came into prominence. They have unceasingly demanded for a “Greater Nagalim” comprising “all contiguous Naga-inhabited areas”, along with Nagaland. That includes several districts of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, and also a large tract of Myanmar. In July 1997 NSCN (I-M) signed a landmark ceasefire agreement, bringing temporary peace to the region. Since then, the Indian government and the NSCN (I-M) were involved in over 80 rounds of discussions covering a period of sixteen years. This process finally culminated in the 2015 peace accord.

The novel *Bitter Wormwood* written by Easterine Kire explores the theme of violence and trauma. The book traces the story of a man named Moselie (Mose) from his birth in 1937 to the present day. It is a historical novel set against the backdrop of the Naga struggle for independence. The novel describes the life of Moselie from an infant to an old man and through it details the violent changes the Naga society had experienced in the 20th century. The novel is divided into three parts namely part one, part two and part three. The first two parts of the book are set in and around Kohima and describes of the life of Moselie as a teenager who joins the Naga freedom struggle as a soldier. It stands as a testament to the extreme destruction and loss of lives at the hands of the Indian army. The latter part states his life as an old retired underground cadre and how he witnesses the gradual degradation of Naga society as a result of factional killings. The third part of the novel introduces Moselie’s grandson Neibuo, who studies in Delhi and via him the issues of Naga youths studying outside the state is underlined. Issues such racism, rapes, discrimination are discussed.

The first part of the novel states many incidences of violence which had become an everyday affair in the lives of people and was a very common sight on the streets. One such

incidence is stated in the first chapter titled *2007* when the narrator describes a factional shooting on the streets:

The young man who was shot lay dead in a spreading pool of blood. Shops quickly downed their shutters. Vegetable sellers trying to save their goods scampered off with their baskets of vegetables....The dead man was no longer twitching...Sand clung to his mouth from which a small trickle of blood had begun to flow. The blood spill from his chest was steadily spreading on the ground. He was very young. He looked barely twenty. (Kire 7-8)

The violence that has overtaken the society of this region has not only affected their lives but it has also resulted in the complete collapse of the previous ideals of the past generation. The high idealism with which the movement for independence was started by its pioneers had somewhat lost its way:

The war that they'd begun with India was a just war. The Nagas had been fighting against the takeover of their ancestral lands by the new nation of India. 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 fought on. In all 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...But now, these killings, this terrorising of their own people was this what it had come to? (Kire 10)

The Male members of a society are the ones mostly engaged in acts of Violence but the women are the ones who are extremely vulnerable to fall prey to sexual violence. During violent times the fear of being physically violated and the atrocities committed against the Naga women by the defence forces is mentioned by Vilau, Grandmother of Moslie and Khrienuo, Mother of Moslie:

"I came back early because there were a lot of army trucks parked above us on the road. They were there a long time," she explained. "We were afraid of the soldiers. They simply stood on the road and stared at us as we went past them."

"They keep coming and coming," said Khrienuo. "Early in the morning, I hear army trucks crawling up the road. One must be very cautious when there are so many soldiers about. During the war, a friend of ours was taken away by the Japanese. We didn't ask her what happened but she kept on crying after she came back." (Kire 55)

Since the novel is based on history, we find a historical event i.e. the Naga Plebiscite described by the narrator in the chapter *Shadows Gathering*. This chapter reveals the aspiration of the Nagas to form an independent state and the measures they adopted in pursuing it in the early 1950s:

In December, the village was assembled together. A man carefully explained that they were collecting signatures and thumbprints of those who wanted a free Nagaland. They would send all the signatures to the Prime Minister of India and then he would

give them their freedom...There were long lines of people on the appointed day. Several men sat at tables and wrote down the names of the people...The signing took the whole day. (Kire 56)

But this aspiration of the Nagas never took any concrete form as mentioned in the chapter *Elections (1952)*. In fact the government came down heavily on the people and curfews were imposed in the state. Later on there were forced elections in the state in which:

Suddenly there were policemen and soldiers all over the village. They pointed guns at people and assembled them all at the Village council...The policemen forced us to put our thumbprints on little pieces of paper and put it in a box. There were several boxes. A man refused to do so as they said. One of the policemen hit him on the side of his head with his rifle and he fell to the ground. After that everyone did as they were told and put their thumbprints on the papers. (Kire 64)

This was just the beginning of the reign of terror that engulfed the erstwhile peaceful state of Nagaland. The brutality conducted by the armed forces knew no bounds: "The Indian Army has burnt several Ao and Sema Villages and raped women and killed some gaonburas. In some villages they have killed many innocent people" (Kire 66). The chaos that was unleashed on the Naga society because of the ongoing violence is stated in the chapter *Occupation*:

School was very unstable, closing frequently for days at a time. Sporadic shooting broke out in town one evening. It shocked everyone and people went scurrying home. Soon after that more and more young men disappeared. Men in their twenties, unmarried young men. Some were educated, some not, the uneducated ones outnumbered the others. (Kire 67)

The most disheartening part of the ongoing conflict was that it was never a 'matter of concern' for mainland India, as if the lives of the ones residing in this forgotten part of the country did not matter. This negligent attitude is evident from the incident in the chapter *Occupation* when:

In the safety of their home Khrienuo, Vilau and Mose put the radio on to see if there would be any mention of these strange happenings in their land. Nothing. "Don't they say anything of the men killed last week?" Khrienuo asked. "No," said Mose. "Listen again, Mose, maybe they will talk about it," his grandmother insisted. But there was never any mention of the horrors at home on the radio. (Kire 68)

When violence takes the form of mindlessness, it cannot sense who is guilty and who is innocent, one such tragic incident unravels in the novel when Moselie's Grandmother is shot while working in the fields. The incident is recalled by a witness:

"Soldiers. We have seen them for the past five days in our woods," said one of the men. "We thought that if they saw us peacefully cultivating our fields, they would not harm us. But when we finished working, there was a shout and they began to shoot towards the fields. We don't know if they were trying to scare us or if they were

aiming at us and missing. It happened so fast. One of the shots hit your grandmother.” (Kire 71)

In the novel the writer Kire shows that the overspreading tentacles of violence had affected every section of the society including the lives of innocent and naïve children. The protagonist of this novel Moselie, as a young boy could not complete his school in the year 1954 because of the trauma and shock caused by the death of his grandmother. Schools were also on the verge of being closed down because of the growing unrest and violence in the village. It was extremely dangerous for children to be walking to and from school in such environment. The students who belonged to rich families “had been taken out of the school by their parents and sent to study in Shillong...The ones who couldn’t afford to do that stayed on” (Kire 78). The children from a very young age were exposed to the cruelty of the raging conflict:

Mose and Neituo were on their way home when they saw four men being beaten by the Army. The men covered their bleeding heads with their hands but the soldiers continued to rain down blows on them. One man lay unconscious on the ground, but the soldiers did not stop kicking him in the head. The two boys ran off as one of the soldiers shouted out in Hindi, “Hey you two! Stop!” The boys ran into an alley and, once out of reach of the soldiers, scurried home....They had heard stories of people being killed and tortured in the village but not until today had they seen the brutality of the army attacks”. (Kire 79)

With the rising violence and endless instances of army brutalities there was a growing sense of anger and as a result of that many young boys and girls joined the underground army. Moselie and his friend Neituo also joined the forces and embarked on an arduous journey as members of the underground army. The chapter *The Jungle Years* describes their struggle:

Life in the Underground was rigorous. They had been warned about that, but they were eager to take it all in. Everyone woke in the early hours, way before dawn. Exercises and training began after tea. After two weeks, they shifted camp. That soon became a routine for them. The trainees felt exhausted from the unaccustomed harshness of their new lifestyle. Their overworked muscles protested when they lay down in rough sleeping bags....Food was meagre too, and though they developed the stringy muscles of hunters, they lost much weight in the first month. (Kire 87-88)

The links of the underground army with the neighbouring countries such as China and Pakistan is also revealed in the chapter *Vilau* when the narrator states that:

Two trips to Pakistan and one to China had successfully procured them more arms and training. On the first trip to Pakistan, the Nagas were put in prison for some days...When trust was established the Pakistani generals gave them excellent training and arms to take back to fight India.

The first trip to China took a great toll on lives. They walked through Burmese territory where...some skirmishes took place in which lives were lost...the extreme weather and roughness of the land claimed even more lives. The ones who reached China were questioned and imprisoned for some days...But when some form of communication had taken place, they gave the Nagas medical care and military training. The teams returned with Chinese arms to Nagaland. (Kire 97)

The endless number of lives being sacrificed at the altar of Naga freedom and the turmoil that followed it made some of the former members of the underground army question the futility of their cause. These sentiments are echoed in the words of Neilhounuo, an ex-underground 'Rifle Girl', she thinks that "The struggle had now gone beyond its twentieth year and there was still no end in sight...she felt a little disillusioned by it all. Too many had died. Needlessly. India was such a large nation. It could keep sending soldiers in for a hundred years" (Kire 113).

Violence takes the lives of men and leaves behind a void which can never be filled. This predicament is felt mostly by the ones who are left behind, especially women. They are forced to undertake roles which demand great responsibilities and shoulders them with a never ending burden. In the chapter *New Life*, the narrator contemplates about their condition and states that:

It was a man's war. If it had been left to the women, maybe they would have talked it over and sorted it out long back. After all, it was they who bore the brunt of the deaths of husbands, lovers, brothers and sons. On both sides. But women did not settle wars. It was unheard of.

The women's lot was to mourn their dead. And the very next day try to find food for their families. The women themselves didn't think that was very much. It didn't compare with the heroic things that men did. They never tried to take any credit for looking after their families in the absence of male members in the household...tilling extra fields when they could, cutting trees for firewood, repairing houses and taking on the works of men. Not many remembered what the women had done to keep their families alive in those dark years. Because war was men's business, not women's. (Kire 113-114)

Subsequently, the violence caused by factional rivalry amongst the underground forces resulted in dire consequences for the common folks. Curfews, killings and bomb blasts were the order of the day. One such gruesome scene of a blast inside a Cinema Hall is witnessed by Moslie in the chapter *Bomb*: "Charred wood splinters from chairs lay strewn about and pieces of human flesh were everywhere. Suddenly he heard a whimper. Following the sound he found a young boy no one had noticed in the confusion. He immediately saw the boys' legs had been blown off below the knees" (Kire 124).

The novel also highlights the plight of former underground men like Moselie and describes how their past life constantly haunts them and threatens to sabotage their present. This bitter truth is evident in the lines from the chapter *The List*:

Mose knew that the day he had stepped forward to join the Underground, he had become a marked man. Though he had not been associated with it for many years now, it was apparent that there were people who considered him dangerous enough to keep him under surveillance. They knew where his loyalties lay. Men like Mose were seen as threats because they could be possible contacts between the Undergrounds and their sympathisers in town. (Kire 132)

The rise of the bloody war between the different factions within the state and the deviation from the actual cause resulted in the utter frustration of the people as the degradation of the society was evident with each passing day. Therefore, a sense of hopelessness is reflected in the chapter *The Violence Spreads* when Neituo comments: "I am quite sure it's the end of our Naga cause...When you begin to kill each other, you no longer have a cause left, do you? You have as good as destroyed your own cause" (Kire 148). The helplessness of the people in the face of violence is reflected in the lines: "We...are dying. That's what is wrong with us. We are losing all human decency and sense of taboo. Human life is becoming worthless and utterly dispensable" (Kire 151).

The constant presence of violence and the pain that follows it is a major theme in this novel and the chapter *More Killings* describes a painful incident wherein a businessman Vihu is shot in the head on the main road. When his widowed mother is told about it, she ran out "Beating her chest, she covered the blood on the road with her arms and wept out loud, "This is my child's blood. Who's done this to my child?" The women of the neighbourhood came out to soothe her and escort her back, but she was inconsolable, and she let out choked screams that rent the air" (Kire 157)

The hijacking of the Naga cause by the factions for extorting money from their fellow Nagas and the misinformation on the part of the India Media is addressed in the chapter *Distorted Truths*. Moslie complains to his friend Neituo:

That the Indian media is cleverly twisting the struggle into something else. No one is genuinely interested in ending it. Some people use it as a livelihood, toting a gun on the pretext and extorting money. Others such as this journalist here, use it to get a story in the papers. That's it, our great struggle for Independence has been reduced to a mere story. You think anyone really cares about the people suffering on account of it?" (Kire 165)

The novel also exposes the misuse of the AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Power Act) by the Indian army in the state of Nagaland. In the chapter *The AFSPA*, "a young father returning home late at night was shot dead by an Indian soldier. There was a huge protest at the shooting. The victim was not a member of any faction and nothing illegal was found on his possession. The Army sought protection from legal charges under the Armed Forces

Special Power Act (AFSPA)...the soldier who fired the shot was immune from being charged” (Kire 169). Thus, an innocent civilian lost his life and nothing could be done about it since the law itself safeguards the perpetrators.

In the novel the writer emphasises the fact that violence and conflict in this region has destroyed not only the lives of the inhabitants of this area but it has also left deep scars on the psyche of the ones on the other side of this war i.e. the armed forces. As in the chapter *Distorted Truths*, Neituo reads a news of a jawan who went berserk and shot his officer. To this Moslie comments: “It’s not surprising think of the psychological damage they undergo when they have seen what we have seen. People killed like cattle, the same people they have been told were their fellow citizens. It must leave them with a terrible weight on their conscience afterwards” (Kire 165). It is a testimony to the truth that there are no winners in a war.

The saddest and the most devastating incident in the novel is the death of Moslie, an old, wise man who had once dedicated his best years to the Naga cause. A loving husband, a dedicated father, a loyal friend and a doting grandfather. He was shot by an extortionist while trying to defend a Bihari shopkeeper: “Leave him alone, you thugs!” Mose shouted, coming forward with his cane raised high. One of the men quickly turned and shot twice at the approaching figure. Mose crumpled to the ground, a bullet in his throat and another in his chest” (Kire 224). The death of Moslie caused immense distress to his family and his friends. But the one most affected was the Bihari pan seller he was distraught by the tragedy and used to wail “Baba, Baba” sitting by Moslie’s grave. In fact his sense of gratitude towards the family of the deceased is heart touching. He performs a kind of penance by taking flowers to the grave and bringing gifts of food to his wife.

Lastly, it can be concluded that the novel is a testament to the violence and trauma the Nagas had to undergo because of the ongoing conflict. It describes how the Nagas had to witness the ruin of their land at the hands of insurgents, armed forces, factions and related groups. But above all it is a tribute to the undying will of the common people of Nagaland who in face of threats and atrocities have held their ground and survived.

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