



The Negation Between Ethnicity And National Identity In Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the complex interplay between ethnicity and national identity in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, a novel set against the backdrop of the Naga insurgency in Northeast India. The study examines how Kire portrays the tension between ethnic identity and the imposition of a national identity by the Indian state. By focusing on the lived experiences of the Naga people, the paper highlights how ethnic consciousness and the struggle for self-determination clash with nationalist ideologies. Kire's narrative reveals this conflict's emotional and psychological toll, underscoring themes of displacement, resistance, and the search for belonging. The analysis draws on the notion of ethnonationalism to discuss how *Bitter Wormwood* critiques the homogenizing tendencies of nationalism while affirming the resilience of ethnic identity. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on identity politics and the challenges of multicultural nation-states in maintaining unity without erasing the distinctiveness of marginalized ethnic groups.

Keywords- Identity, Politics, Nationalism, Naga, Ethnicity.

A.Z. Phizo cried out the heart and essence of Nagaland when he said, “Nagaland is the land of the Nagas; it is Naga country and nobody else. We are not refugees or immigrants in this beautiful land. Our own language tells exactly what a country is. We call our country ‘Ura’ which literally means ‘we are first’ ”; these lines are from his memorable plebiscite speech in Kohima, 1951. The tragic discourse for the land started when Nagaland was not technically the land of Nagas anymore as Phizo has claimed; the war against the enormous nation of India was fought immensely by the courageous Naga people. However, the futility of it is that many lives of the Nagas were lost and it was not even a pyrrhic victory. The land of Nagaland is trodden and Nagaland does not become the land of the Nagas no more even though they were in their ‘Ura’ first. The novel *Bitter Wormwood* explores deeply the dilemma of the Nagas while they were fighting for their rights and ownership in their homeland. In her introduction, Easterine Kire explains the main aim of writing the novel,

This book is not about the leaders and heroes of the Naga struggle. It is about the ordinary people whose lives were completely overturned by the freedom struggle. Because the conflict is not more important than the people who are its victims (Kire 6).

Kire also comments in her interview with Dibyajyoti Sarma for *RAIOT* that “the people caught in the conflict were important, that their lives mattered. This is why the book centers around two families on either side and on the friendship that springs up in the third generation”. The way Kire portrays the life of Mose throughout the novel depicts him not as a representation of the struggle but as a fragment of a bigger story. Subsequently, the freedom struggle is presented mainly through the lens of a few characters which provide a more coherent narrative to the novel.

The contradiction between the representation of Ethnicity and Nationality can be seen in the novel where the war between the entities of Ethnicity that is the Nagas and the idea of Nationality through the narrative of the Indian Army provides the clashes of ideologies to build a ‘nation’. Li Xi Yuan’s “Ethnicity or Nationality?: Minority Policy and Ethnic Conflict in Contemporary China” where the examination of the concept of *Minzu* which can be translated to both nation and ethnicity provides various frameworks to understand ethnic politics, especially in the context of minority studies.

In this political framework of the country, national identity prevails over any ethnic identity, and every ethnicity must accept its political position and economic condition as determined by the country (154).

The idea that the identity of the Nagas will always be lower than that of their country due to its political framework can be seen particularly in terms of the portrayal of the sufferings of the civil people as depicted in the novel. The idea of democracy where various ethnicities in India are supposed to be ‘equal’ can be ironically seen through Jawaharlal Nehru’s “Unity of India” (1938) talks about the state of India if they are to be independent, he said, “In the world- wide conflict of ideas and politics, India stands for democracy and against Fascism and the totalitarian state. She stands for peace and cooperation between nations and ultimately the

building up of a world order” (23, 24). The irony of this statement can be seen clearly in the novel where the “Election (1952)” took place; a man in the village council spoke harshly about Nehru.

“That man Nehru”, the man shouted, “Do you know what Nehru said when he got his copy of the Nagas plebiscite? He shocked his fist and shouted, ‘Whether heaven falls or India goes to pieces and blood run red in the country, I don’t care. Nagas will not allowed to become independent (Kire 62).

The juxtaposition of words like “peace” and “pieces” and Nehru’s use of the word “totalitarian state” to how he treated Nagaland’s plebiscite is tremendously ironic. Nehru’s comparison of India and America in his essay which is also bred in “democratic tradition” can be analyzed further. A 2017 film *Hostiles* directed by Scott Cooper, where the film is about the story of the Native American and the white man who took his land, it depicts the heartbreak and the tragedy of the Native Americans who lost their homeland. At the beginning of the film, Scott Cooper starts the film by quoting D H Lawrence's reflection on America, “The essential American soul is hard, isolated, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted”. Since Nehru compared India to America in his essay, perhaps India’s soul was also “hard, isolated, stoic, and a killer” when its soldiers came to the land of Nagaland. The intention of the film is surprisingly parallel to the Naga story even though different narratives exist between the dilemma of the Nagas and the Native Americans. A two ‘democratic’ countries that subjugated the native inhabitants to establish “democracy” and “world order”. Niketu Iralu in his speech “Historical Rights of the Nagas and their Quest for Integration”, remarks on the reason for the Government of India to establish a “world order” amidst its totalitarianism which Easterine Kire included in the novel as Appendix V.

We cannot blame the GoI for the stand it has taken all along concerning the issue of Naga sovereignty. India has simply defended the integrity of the map she inherited from the British. Any other government in its place would have done the same thing. (260)

The protection of that ‘integrity’ is of the utmost importance for India. However, the price for that “integrity” is too high; it had to be paid by the life of the Naga people, the life of the naïve and oblivious soldiers who were sent to Nagaland which Kire depicts in the novel, she portrayed every side of the story through characters, especially like Mose and Himmat. A. Z Phizo’s plebiscite speech where he said, “The Indians have no vested interest in our country and there is not a single Indian nationality who own an acre of land in our Nagaland” is one of the statements that rung through to the Naga people for the protection of their own “integrity”. A. Z. Phizo is even mentioned in the novel when Mose tells his grandmother Khrienuo about Phizo who was in central jail for writing letters to the British Parliament to which Khrienuo replies, “We have never been a part of India before? Why should we join them now?” (Kire 53).

Mahatma Gandhi whose death is “a loss not only to India but to the Nagas and the whole world” is portrayed as a “kind man” in the novel. Even though Khrienuo always thought that Gandhi and Nehru were “brother” (Kire 48), and indeed the two worked together harmoniously in their leadership of India, their attitudes

and actions towards Nagaland are very different. When Nagaland was forced to take part in the 1952 election which Kire portrays in the novel, this action of the government of India contradicts Gandhi's notion of Indian nationalism where he said, "Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive". Li Xi Yuan's essay where the power of national identity can be examined with the power of "Indian Nationalism" where, "State policies have great power to shape patterns of ethnic identification when controlled resources are distributed along ethnic lines" (153), these "great power" indeed tremendously impacted the identification of Nagaland as a whole.

American philosopher Hans Kohn who is considered the most influential theorist of nationalism and the leading pioneer of the academic study of nationalism talks about the formation of nationalism in his essay "The Nature of Nationalism": "Nationalism, and even in a higher degree cosmopolitanism, is a highly complex and originally abstract feeling which gains the emotional warmth of concreteness only through the effects of a historical development which, by education, economic interdependence, and corresponding political and social institutions, brings about the integration of the masses and their identification with a body far too great for any concrete experience" (7). The dynamics of nationalism between the two nations Nagaland and India are very different in the novel; the notion of nationalism especially for the Indian soldiers can highly resonate with what Hans Kohn called "highly complex and originally abstract" because India was just an infant nation, various old kingdoms combined by the British. The blind nationality can be seen from Himmat when he narrates that Nagas were "primitive warmongers, with a fearsome tradition of headhunting" (Kire 195) and going to Nagaland with a "very high morale, believing we were going off on a mission to save the country" (Kire 196). The 'complexities' and 'abstract feeling' of nationalism that Kohn remarks can be seen in Himmat's narration of the outlook of the Indian soldiers towards the Nagas.

They found themselves in a situation where they were warring against their own people, after all they had been sent there after being told that the Nagas were Indians. .. It was a thin dividing line. Some men had nervous breakdowns, those who didn't, turned to brutality. They just let go of their humanity (Kire 200).

Kohn made it abundantly clear that nationalism does not arise from concrete and coherent elements like possessions of the same language, similar features, and similar historical background but a "product of the growth of social and intellectual factors at a certain history" (5) and not the "eternal laws" or "natural laws". Even though Indian nationalism arises from those "social and intellectual factors", it is immensely clear that it does not include the Nagas because India's so-called nationalism towards the Nagas is fallacious, even Himmat said, "We were pawns in a bigger game" (201).

In a letter addressed to a person called Kevisato on the subject of "Naganess", Niketu Iralu eludes the rise of nationalism among the Naga during their fight for independence, "Insecurity stemming from perception of new threats makes people realize their need to consolidate and defend their identity. A deepening sense of

this kind of insecurity drew them closer together because of the rapidity of the new challenges from the changing world impacting them. This process of coping with challenges produced their struggle for their aspirations, that is, the Naga struggle". Nagaland also like India is composed of various ethnicities, languages, and social and cultural norms, nationalism did form to defend their "identity" as Iralu mentions and their nationalism came from the product of "social and intellectual factors" as Kohn has implied. However, the dynamic of nationalism between the two is immensely different even though Rakesh said to Neibou that, "one fighting for freedom and the other thinking that he was fighting to preserve the integrity of his nation" (Kire 188). Comparison between defending one's nation and defending the 'integrity' of one's nation is hugely different; the Nagas fight for their ownership of their land while India fights so that their so-called 'integrity', which can also be called the defendant of the insignificant petty pride of having a unified India. Rabindranath Tagore's *Nationalism* (1917) discussed the true nature of Indian nationalism, and the humanity that he implied can provide empathy for the Nagas.

India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country than the ideals of humanity (Tagore 107).

British journalist Gary Younge in his essay on the politics of identity reflects on the capabilities, ambivalences, and objects of 'identity' as a source for political action in the journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, he said, "Identity is not seeking role in politics. It is there. Nor is it seeking a role in our lives. Nor is it seeking a role in our lives. It is there too... Identity is like fire". The identity of the Naga people plays a crucial role in the novel, the horror of the election of 1952 by the Nagas perhaps made them technically Indians. Their citizenship played by the Indian government by giving them statehood in 1963 was not "welcome news" to Mose and Neituo and astonished the Underground to its core, an officer was so angry that he even exclaimed that "they are traitors and all traitors should be eliminated" (Kire 103). Younge was right in his statement about the presence of identity in politics because by giving the Nagaland statehood, they are simply using their new identity as an Indian citizen to gain political and lawful control over the Nagaland.

The dynamics of the Naga as an Indian citizen is also even further explored by Kire through the character of Neibou and Rakesh, indeed Naga became India, a nation that wants Nagaland vehemently and fight for it tremendously does not seems to accept them in reality, it is clear that they only did it to preserve their "integrity" as Iralu remarks. Kire explored not only the identity of Naga but Northeast as a whole; her voice can be seen through Neibuo,

How are we expected to believe that we are Indians when all this racism goes on?... 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 change anything much (Kire 208).

The use of Identity in the political paradigm is explored further by Kwame Anthony Appiah, a British-Ghanaian cultural theorist; in his essay "The Politics of Identity", he explores the psychological effect of using one's identity in politics. Appiah said, "We use identity to construct our human lives. For we make our lives as men and as women, as Yanks and as Brits, as Catholics and as Jews; we make them as philosophers and as novelists; we make them as fathers and as daughters. Identities are a central resource in this process" (Appiah 6). The rise of the Naga to "defend their identity" as Iralu said in his letter "construct" their "human lives" and make their lives as the identity of the Nagas. However, it is again 'deconstructed' by the rise of factionalism where Identity as a faction becomes the main entity; even Mose exclaims, "My God! Then – then we have played right into India's hands! This is what the Indian army would want – for us to fight each other and fight the war for them!" (Kire 145).

In an interview with Sudipta Datta for *The Hindu*, Easterine Kire talks about the effect of Christianity among the Naga people, "The positive side of Christian conversion was that it stopped head hunting and feuding among the tribes because the missionaries preached the ideology of forgiving your enemies"; the impact of Christianity plays an important part in the novel where the characters faith were constantly depends on "Jisu" who helps them goes through tough times. Perhaps this is only one of the positive impacts of colonialism in Nagaland because the British left an enormous mess in the political-geographical landscape of the North-East region as a whole. Kire includes 'The Simon Commission', a letter written by the Naga Club in 1929 where they ask the British government, "not be thrust to the mercy of the people who could never conquer us themselves" (249) which was completely ignored by the colonizers and the impact is the horrendous struggle of Nagaland which is the main theme of the novel.

In other various postcolonial countries, the postcolonial struggle is about finding the nation's identity as a postcolonial country and establishing the nation as a whole. On the other hand, the postcolonial Naga is more brutal, more violent, and more dehumanizing even than the time the white man ruled Nagaland. Perhaps the British did not consider the impact when they gave Nagaland to India, furthermore, it is clear they are not concerned about it, even Nielhounuo said to Mose, "We should tell the British to come back and settle all for us" (Kire 122). In an article by Manu S. Pillai on Angami Zapu Phizo, he wrote about what Phizo did tell the British to come back and settle for them as Neilhounuo had suggested, however, that attempt was futile, "He (Phizo) made every effort to gather international support for his cause, but there was nothing anybody could offer. After all, Nehru, despite his blood-curdling policy in Nagaland, was a towering post-colonial figure; Phizo, as London's newspapers announced, only famous 'headhunter' ". Even though Kire implied that the Naga people are no longer 'head hunters' due to Christianity, the incongruity is that the Naga people are still

considered ‘head hunters’ even after the postcolonial times when they were already devoted Christians, they were still “primitive warmongers” and “with a fearsome tradition of headhunting” even to the Indian army.

In the chapter of the novel, “Out on the Porch 2007”, Neituo said to his grandfather Mose on the dilemma of factionalism, “When we are so divided, we don’t have much hope for the future” (Kire 211), perhaps the concept of an individual can be applied a single clan, tribe or faction of Nagaland and the concept of community to Nagaland as a whole. Hans Kohn in his essay observes the position of nationalism and the fluidity of it, he said, “Nationalities are products of the living forces of history, and therefore always fluctuating, never rigid....Nationality is, therefore, nothing absolute, and the greatest mistake, responsible for most of the extremities of today, is to make it an absolute, an objective a priori which is a source of all political and cultural life”. (12). The rise of the Naga nationalism does not adhere to the community i.e. Nagaland as a whole but give reverence to individuality i.e. the faction, this is exactly what Kohn talks about “fluctuating” and ‘arbitrary’ nature of nationalism. The rise of factionalism mocks what Phizo said in his Plebiscite speech on the concept of Thino (group) organization where their community group is a living and dynamic institution where the system lets a Naga loves his country and nation “intensely”.

The system of our Naga community organization, which is rooted in the humane principle of individual responsibility, sharing collectively the common weal and woe together, had stood the test of time without waver throughout those centuries of great changes.

The system that Phizo proudly talks about becomes paradoxical when narratives of clan rivalry are constantly embedded in the novel, the spies that the Underground had to execute, the incident from the first chapter, the killing of a part-time businessman Vihu (157), and many other aspects signifies the paradox of what Phizo said about the Naga community organization. Neituo also comments on the crumbling state of Nagaland communalism, “When you begin to kill each other, you no longer have a cause left, do you? You have as good as destroyed you own cause” (Kire 148).

American–German psychologist Erik Erikson observes the notion of “identity crisis” psychologically among the youth in his essay on that predicament, “Youth, in particular, depends on the ideological coherence of the world it is meant to take over and therefore is highly aware of whether the system is strong enough in its traditional form to be “confirmed” by the identity process, or sufficiently weakened to suggest renovation, reformation, or revolution... A specific rage can be aroused wherever identity development loses the promise of a traditionally assured wholeness” (4). Perhaps the youth of Naga who fight for Nagaland does not find a coherent system and “assured wholeness” that Erikson presented even though this psychological essay is for the dilemma of a youth facing identity crisis while growing up. However, it also resonates clearly with the youth of the Naga people, the suggestion of “renovation”, “reformation” or “revolution” of the community by the youth of the Naga results in a distorted manner. The youth feel the need to reform because they blame predecessors like Mose “have sold out the cause” (Kire 139). However, it is also not clear that the young Nagas

give utmost importance to the community as a whole because, in various parts of the novel, various elements where the violence is for their gain or the community is hard to differentiate, Mose even said to Neituo.

Sometimes, I wonder if those young new soldiers in the factional groups even know what they are fighting for. (Kire 161)

One of the most important aspects of *Bitter Wormwood* is that it truly captures the conflict and violence that ensued in Nagaland, the novel was first published in 2011 and the chapter of the novel took place in 2007. The construction of the chapter is immensely important because it emphasizes how close violence is even at the time of the present-day era. The conflict and violence are not in the past but it is still in the present day. Margaret Ch. Zama in her essay “Emerging Literature from North-East India” talks about the emanation of literature from the conflict zones, “Though the debate remains as to whether writer are the conscience keepers of a nation or not, the writing from the Northeast appears to have no choice. The compulsion to respond to the regional challenges of insurgency, state-sponsored terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and corruption, is too much strong to resist” (42). The long history of violence, bloodshed, carnage, slaughter, atrocities, and mayhem is reflected in various writers from the northeastern states like Robin S Ngangom, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Nini Lungalung, Monalisa Changkija, Esterine Iralu, Temsula Ao, James Dokuma, KC Lalvunga and many more. Subsequently, *Bitter Wormwood* is just a fragment of the product of the massive and colossal paradigm of the literature of North-East writings especially on the subject of conflict and violence.

Philip Q. Yang’s “Theories of Ethnicities” in which his four propositions on the characteristics of Ethnicity can be seen through his lens of an “integrated approach” can be applied to the Ethnic characteristics not just the Nagas but to the Ethnic identity of Northeast as a whole. The transformation predominantly after various insurgencies can be seen predominantly throughout the land. The shifting of the nature of identity after the adoption by India is visible. Therefore, the painful process of this transformation which Kire suggested through the usage of “bitter wormwood” may be the answer. *Bitter Wormwood*’s message at the end of the novel, when Kire eludes to the idea of forgiveness through Neibuo, is what perhaps Kire suggested to deal with the conflict and violence, “I have forgiven..” Neibuo replied, “Not so much the men...but the act itself. I always need to stop and remind myself of that so I don’t get eaten up by the bitterness, I’d be of no use to anyone if I let this destroy me” (Kire 242). Kire addressed a criticism when a particular reader called it an “idealistic proposal” in an interview with *RAIOT*, saying, “but if we are not idealistic, what would our world be reduced to?” Perhaps the idea of using “bitter wormwood” is indeed too much of an idealistic proposal, however, the history of conflict and violence still chained the North-East tremendously therefore it still does not provide any coherent solution. Perhaps, the usage of bitter wormwood is the best option.

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