Akshara: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Literature and Language
ISSN: 0975-5373; E-ISSN: 2583-4738
Vol. 15, May 2023, pp. 10-16
Edited by Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.waoar.org/akshara/

Identity and Character Development: Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire in her novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), projects an identity character in the traditional Naga society. The coming of radio into Mose's household enables his Grandmother, Mother and Mose to know more about the outside world. The novel portrays how Naga society was violently torn-apart in the catastrophe of violence during the period of 1937 till the modern era. It entails how violence enables a new identity spirit which he was not in the beginning of his life and that helped him to move forward. But his life journey is far and more difficult to begin and to process from being an easy one. However, he, like a true warrior is able to hold on to his struggle and evolve in the traditional Naga society. The paper attempts to explore conflict in the Naga society how the people overcome horror and create identity in their own lives. It aims to depict the challenges and difficulties faced by the traditional Nagas. This study helps us to know the identity characters in the novel. The paper focuses on the writing about violence and those who had struggled in their lives to establish their identity as reflected in Kire's writing.

Keywords: Violence, conflict, contemporary spirit, fear, uncertainty, struggle, existence, evolution, endurance, progression, identity

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Easterine Kire, one of the legendry literary writers from Nagaland has vividly portrayed violence in her novel, *Bitter Wormwood*. It entails the elements of identity and character development. The novel recounts the story of a man from 1937 till the modern era. The story is set in 2007 projecting conflict between the Naga underground army and Indian armed forces in the Naga society. The historical novel is set against the backdrop of the Naga struggle for freedom and violence experiences in the Naga society[1]. Mose's childhood, his family, the routines and rituals of village way of life paint an evocative picture of a peaceful life now long vanished in the traditional village. Violence has facilitated in the process of defining the Naga people as 'peripheral' individuals. However, their rich literary heritage has enabled them to come out of it heroically and create identity in the contemporary Naga society. "*Bitter Wormwood* gives a poignant insight into the human cost behind the political headlines from one of India's most beautiful and misunderstood regions." (Blurb of the back page.) Thus, the story shows what it meant to live in the state of constant fear and never-ceasing violence and conflicts from rebels and forces alike.

It laments the experience of fear and silence in the society. The people experience genocide, starvation, burning of villages, fields, granaries and tortured to death and also the violation of rights by the armed forces. "After the forced election, the police and the army closed in everywhere. The villagers saw them hiding in the woods when they went to the fields" (67). The occupation in the Nagas Hills affected their lives that led them to experience psychological self-hatred, alcoholism, depression, self-abuse and domestic abuse. Kire elaborates an evocative scenario of violence and the people who became captive in their own homeland[2]. It expresses how their church was outraged by violence and conflict in the Naga society by the armed forces. The story demonstrates the lives of the Naga people's suffering, trauma, endurance, struggle, pain, uncertainty, fear, existence, evolution, progression and identities in their own lives during this period in the Naga society.

Kire depicts Naga society during this period of violence and conflict as a complicated identity. It emphasises on violence and militancy in the novel that chronicle the journey of Mose's, a traditional young man and his effort to establish a new identity and also enables him to set forth and develop a positive attitude towards others. The novel unravels the complex layer of violence experiences in the lives of the Naga people. Mose, a child of humble background fights all the odds to establish a new identity in the traditional village with the help of his supportive grandmother Khrienuo and his dutiful mother Vilau which enables them to redefine their lives in their own way. Mose symbolizes his progression in the traditional village identity to

modern identity. She principally focuses on the protagonist, Mose and his evolution from a traditional village boy to a man with contemporary spirit.

The novel *Bitter Wormwood* projects the period of 1937 till the modern era in the Naga society. A young man is gunned down in cold blood in the broad day light by an unknown gun man. It brutalized the people in Kohima. The novel describes the occupation made by the armed forces in 1947 and the violence setback that had been experienced by the Naga people for a long decade. "The Nagas had been fighting against the takeover of their ancestral lands by the new nation of India" (10). The peaceful way of life in Mose's household acts as an embodiment in his concept of hope. The factional work undertakes the life journey of the ordinary people. The story details the process of social change and alternated community. The novel enunciates the Mose's childhood, his family, his village, and traditional way of life that plays an important role in the story. The story reminisces their nostalgic peaceful way of life they had in the beginning that seems to have overturned or disappeared by the freedom struggle movement. The novel gives a description of how the coming of radio into Mose's family enabled his Grandmother, Mother and Mose to learn the words like "repatriation, intermediary, resettlement, partition and nationalisation", and a land called America and helps them to know more about the outside world (38). It further gives us a perspective of Mose's and his amicable friend Neituo that made them to voluntarily join the underground group to struggle for freedom and there, they were caught in a maelstrom of violence, protest and repression, attack and reprisal- that ends up ripping their communities apart violently. Thus, it enables them to have a different and broader perspective in their own lives and towards others.

Mose's growing up in the traditional Angami Naga society is ready to give up his life and sacrifice for the country and the cause for the Nagas to struggle for independence as the story of violence seems to be a never ending one in this region during this period of time. Mose is a born warrior and takes on the challenges. The retired Mose is upset due to the declining process in the society or violence that divides the society. The herb, bitter wormwood, is believed by his people to keep away from bad spirit and tucked behind his ears that would help him to keep the evil of violence away from the Naga people.[3] "The Nagas confronted with violent struggle all around, it becomes a powerful talisman".[4] The allied forces halt the movement of the male individuals in the schools, offices and business establishments in the Naga society. However, they did not stop Mose from entering the underground group. It gives us an insight into how the Naga people underwent a cruel attack by

the armed forces in killing the lives of the common people and traumatising the innocent villagers. It not only thwarts the lives of the common people but it also led them to a situation of utter dissolution. Violence is the result of conflict of opinion, ideas or ideology of the people or the group of people. And the innocent people are left in apathy to endure the struggle and pain heroically and thereby create their own identities amidst terror and their ability to heroically come out of it in the contemporary Naga society.

Mose got married to Neilhounuo, a girl from the same underground group. She is referred as "the rifle girl" and a good soldier, and she is also a good wife who took good care of her mother-in-law, Vilau, until her death and that enabled Mose's spirit to be free from the jungle life of the past. Her love continues to install in him to break free from the shackles of the past and encourage him to begin anew with renewed spirit. Thus, Mose's life begins to evolve with the coming of radio. Mose's struggle becomes his ultimate goal in life and it inspires others and also earns a new identity in the society. In the end he begins to live his own carefree life by establishing his own small business. Thus, the prospect of his family life begins to flourish in abundance with faith and renewed hope and also enables him to become an epitome to others in the traditional Naga society.

Easterine Kire's portrayal of character is vivid in the novel, and Mose is one such prominent character. Mose's thought embarks as a new recruit in the underground group with the urge to struggle and engage in the Naga's cause by giving up his education and his family behind during the conflict period. It is not an easy task but his determination enables him to go further. "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" (66). Violence shatters the lives of the people and their relationship, thus, compelling them to question their own identity and mode of existence. Thus, she portrays their struggle for independence and continuing search for identity amidst terror. The portrayal of how the Naga people were able to find replete amidst horror is detailed in the story. When Mose was able to hoist the Naga flag in the stadium in the midst of violence, the armies begin a fresh search for the underground people with outmost force, and the innocent villagers become a victim after the accident followed by galvanizing the village elders till they accept or die.

> They sought out in their jungle camps and hideouts and tortured agonizingly to make them confess and names and whereabouts of the comrades when they were caught. The longer they held out, the more survived were maimed for life. Many died and those who survived were maimed for life (93).

The innocent people were left in the dichotomy between the underground forces and armed forces in the villages during this period. Thus, the shocking atrocities became the ordeal in the Naga society during this period.

In the beginning of the novel it details how his grandmother during Mose's birth gave him a name Moselie (Mose) which is the symbol of a warrior in the novel. Thus, by naming him Mose she calls him a new identity name. Mose's group continuously moves from one place to another conveying their love for the country and encourages those who are ready to fight the hurdles for the Nagas with all their capability. When the food storage became insufficient for his group, he did not give up but rather acts as a catalyst to fight back against their hunger and starvation. When they came to know about burning of villages and also rapes and killings and large numbers of the villagers starved to death and also the horrific injury on their bodies, all made Mose's group feel shattered. "The army's objective in burning villages and torturing the villagers was to cut off the lifeline for the Underground members effectively. Almost every week reports of rapes and killings poured in. Villages that were grouped together and starved for days had large numbers of deaths" (94). However, remaining restrain and enduring pain helps them to break free from the shackles of pain and enables them to protect their ancestral land and respect their lost ones' souls which help them to find their own self and real identity during this outmost crises and turbulent period of their life.

Mose joins in the underground group and gives up his life for the cause of the country. He completes the path of his own self-discovery and re-establishes the contemporary identity in the Naga society. He undergoes various challenges and difficulty which enable him to be a true warrior and stand out amidst crucial experiment in his own life and also engage him to develop in the positive aspects towards the other people. Thus, violence helps in understanding a period marked by various adversities breaking the path of uncertainty and fear across the country and even spreading universal peace in violence brims literature that is essentially contemporary.

Before joining the underground group, Mose's life was guided by his mother and grandmother and he had to live under their love and care. He did not have an individuality of his own. But after becoming over ground individual, it enables him to

live his own life and without the support of his loved ones. His grandmother's love cheers him ahead in his life. He also attempts to move on and fight harder and get adapted to all his new ways. Mose's life is full of hardships and struggle which instil capability in him to evolve into a man with new hope. His determination is firm and strong which helps him to overcome the difficult situation and that endows him with a new spirit. Mose evolves as an independent man in the contemporary Naga society by facing various challenges in his life. The horrifying scenario and experiences become the driving force to continue his journey, respond and to carry out his task further and also participate with others. The various clashes he met and the awful war all cause his life a grievous anguish which enables him to make a new finding in his real self.

The novel recounts the violence history of the Naga people in the traditional Naga society during the independence movement between the underground forces and armed forces. Mose's spirit of enthusiasm engages him with a different definition and significant platform which enables him to establish his own identity and character. It incites him to reach out to others, and also helps him to grow stronger and shine forth. Thus, violence sets the platform for the principal characters of Mose, Neituo, Khrienuo, Vilau, Neilhounuo and others to break barriers of the traditional Naga society. Their rich literary heritage enables them to evolve with traditional identities in the contemporary Naga society.

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