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**War and Precariousness:  
Tracing the Naga History in Easterine Kire's  
Bitter Wormwood**

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*Devina Kumari, Research Scholar*


Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi

**Address for Correspondence: [serviceheb@gmail.com](mailto:serviceheb@gmail.com)**

**ABSTRACT**

Indian literature has witnessed in recent times the proliferation of narratives from periphery challenging the elitist history of India. History exposes the vulnerabilities of past, chronicling wars and highlighting the precarity that stems from being war veteran or casualty. Easterine Kire, a writer from Nagaland explores this precarious existence in her novel, Bitter Wormwood. Naga history etched in violence of despotic military rule suffered from a cultural and social collapse. The uncertainty of survival when embroiled in a space of continuous strife, conflicts, government surveillance qualifies as a terrific predicament detrimental to human body and psyche. The normalcy promised post independent becomes momentary for the Naga population when they protest against the impending tyrannical rule of armed forces. The aim is to study this loss of normality and the issue of everyday peril in a war infringed zone. The focus would also be on how such existence dilutes individual identities by polarizing them into aggressors and pacifiers. The psychological aspect of violence and human action would be explored to understand the dynamics between them. Primarily, the aim is to bring the history of Naga persecution to the forefront and exploring the dichotomy of war and precarity through their perspective.

**Keywords- Peripheral Narratives, Panopticism, Power structure, Northeast history, Memory and identity.**

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Simon During, in his 2015 essay, "From the Subaltern to the Precariat" writes, "Precarity has been identified as a double condition- at once a socioeconomic condition of insecurity and poverty, as well as an existential or anthropological condition, 'one in which human beings are constitutionally unable to fully ground themselves in the world and for that reason are open both to anxiety and to openness and risk.'" Joseph Addison, in his magazine the Spectator has meditated upon the term as, "this little happiness is so very precarious, that it wholly depends on the will of others." Life acquires the nature of utmost precarity in times of war. War, military rule and precarious existence qualify the history of Nagaland. The precarity of past persists in the present cultural milieu of Nagaland indicating their vulnerable existence in postcolonial times. Easterine Kire presents the post independence history of Nagaland as a narrative of everyday precarity. It is a narrative of suffering and violence experienced in war; an account of war veterans, casualties, a tale of the forgotten Naga history- a community whose lives succumbed to civil war, surveillance of state, genocide etc. Easterine Kire expounds in *Bitter Wormwood*, the manner in which, history reports state violence and investigates situations of precarity that stem from war. Accordingly, Leo Tolstoy describes, "Humans do not operate in vacuum: they exist in the context of space, time, and causality with others. Because of this condition, no command can truly be ordered and followed, for people make an infinite number of decisions that result in an incalculable number of actions. These actions, in turn, affect other human beings, making it impossible for anyone person to locate, much less comprehend, all of the decisions and actions of human beings involved in one incident." War and violence initiates a give and take of revenge, an emotion, which blinds one to humanity until the motive is fulfilled and the means, accomplished. Violence in war is causal. It doesn't exist in isolation. It's a chain reaction –with one leading to the other. The text disseminates this reciprocal relation between war and human action through the struggle between the Underground- a covert resistance group and the representatives of Central Government- the Indian army. Kire reveals that army was not involved or interested in containing the revolt rather it concentrated on perpetrating torture. Consequently, the novel traces the trajectory of violence and war from independence of India to present day Nagaland, which is rife with factional killings. The fight of Nagas was for building of a separate nation state for themselves. Hence, the fight against the government was recognized as a just war. A war for achieving sovereignty. A war to end all other wars. But, it ended in giving birth to terrorism and rule of agitators, aggressors. Bloodshed and human carnage became a routine phenomenon with deaths normalised as an everyday thing. Homicide began to be witnessed and internalised not as an abrupt occurrence but a familiar affair. Judith Butler enunciates in *Precarious Lives*- "Our injury is at the behest of others". Vulnerability of safely existing is dependent entirely on external unrelated entity-the anonymous other. The perpetrators target masses relegating the civilians again at the receiving end of war. Kire voices, "Those men, they were not armed they were just innocent civilians" said Mose."(Kire 80) This persecution of common population has been aptly categorized by Butler as corollary of 'non grievable lives'. This nongrievability problematises their safety and intensifies their precarity. The atmosphere of curfew, deathly stillness surrounds the crime scene in war infested Nagaland. Human lives become

engulfed in fear with situations like curfew seeming an everyday phenomenon. “Don’t be out late when there is curfew on son,” (Kire 76) Vilau, Mose’s mother warns him of dangers lurking around his life outside the four walls of his home amidst war time curfew. Hence, the feeling of precarity stemming from external surroundings doubles up.

Precarity is often associated with feelings of anxiety, insecurity and a terrorizing belief of what’s going to happen next. It insinuates towards abnormalcy, eventually naturalising it. Mose, the novel’s protagonist, expresses his predicament, “I don’t feel right to be studying when we are living in such troubled times. Let me take over the field work so that you can stay at home safely”, to which his mother Vilau retorts fittingly, “What makes you think I’d be safer at home, son? They are everywhere and they attack everyone.”(Kire, 80). This omnipresence of fear and vulnerability is what Butler delineates in *Precarious Life*, “these anonymous external entities because of which our existence is precarious are everywhere and anywhere.” Mose’s faith in God is shaken when so many innocent lives are claimed everyday around him. The population is divided into those who are vulnerable and those who are not. The invulnerable undertakes the responsibility to protect the vulnerable. The underground members act as the protector of the vulnerable naga villagers. The resistance against the army is initially envisaged by the Underground as a productive enterprise with it being perceived as a test of perseverance of Nagas, a test of their feeling of oneness with their motherland. Naturally, these protests generate within the Naga community a feeling of collective identity. The freedom struggle instilled in them, a feeling of affinity for their ancestral land. Even the political turmoil is not able to alleviate the feeling of togetherness, community which the Nagas experience. Nagaland becomes for them what Benedict Anderson terms as, ‘Imagined Community’. An imagined community is a concept developed by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities* to analyze nationalism. Anderson depicts a nation as a socially constructed community, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group.” There is no geographical line dividing their state from india.”(*Imagined Communities* 6-7). The resistance gave birth to Naga nationalism. The hoisting of Naga national flag on Indian Independence day becomes an instance of creation of a meaning through an act of dissent. Movement ceased during curfew. To quell the clandestine rebellion, illegal, suspicious firing is engineered by the army simultaneously reinforcing its public presence by patrolling the streets day in and day out. Bomb explosion are a common sight during wars. They add more to the gruesomeness of wars. Nagaland witnessed the haunting 1973 explosion at its famous Ruby cinema hall. The targeting of public places and unpredictability of such incidents endangers our existence, marring it with perpetual fear of death. In death it’s difficult to say which tribe a person belongs to. Death homogenises, equalizes everyone. Tragically, what launched as an ecstatic revolution for freedom of state metamorphoses quickly into a civil war between state government and Naga revolutionaries. The fight is ultimately reduced to a fight for survival, eventually triggering insurgency within the community. The violence adopted by Naga anarchists is suitably interpreted by Butler, “And though for some mourning can only be resolved through violence, it seems clear that violence only brings on more loss and the failure to heed the claim of precarious life only leads, again

and again, to the dry grief of an endless political rage”.(Precarious Life XIX). Butler talks about mourning after violence and how one act of violence gives way to another stemming from the political rage the mourning generates. A random shooting during a wedding festivity disturbs the sanctity of the occasion and disrupts familiarity and security of a public place. Time and again the façade of normalcy is broken by unpredictable violence. Mose and Neituo witness the army’s brutality first hand when they encounter soldiers brutally beating three men. The savagery of the spectacle terrifies them and confirms their doubts of army brutality they had heard in retrospect. Violence often became a spectacle during this war, with both sides perpetrating violence over the other in a display of their respective power. “I didn’t know they would do that in broad daylight. No place is safe now” ,said Mose”. (Kire 79) Safety is compromised, precarity is ensured. The after-effect of military violence and continuous persecution of Nagas compel Mose and Neituo to join the underground. However, with great power comes greater responsibility. The soldiers of the underground raid a military post which procures them arms and ammunitions to retaliate back at the army. However, they are advised to use the guns with responsibility. They are doctrinated by the underground leaders to defend themselves and not claim the life of their opponent. During the initial years of conflicts between the underground and the army, a sense of sanity prevailed within the underground members, their sole aim being to drive the army out of Nagaland, liberate it. However, the skirmish between the two parties results in further brutality, with it becoming a normal scenario in social environment of Nagaland. Also, with senseless brutality from the army, the tactics and the methods employed by Underground assumed a harsher shape. Apart from disturbing the normalcy of Nagaland, the anarchy led to collapse of cultural and social life, with Mose dropping out of school, after the death of his grandmother in a random army ambush. The schools become susceptible of closure with students from elite naga families pulling out of schools in Nagaland and sent to Shillong. Suppression and interrogation of the common mass, harassment of the family of the underground members, etc develop into a routine activity. These acts harboured in the army a false sense of doing something productive and in favour of the government. Hence, the narrative begins with Mose’s story and ends with Neibou’s perspective and experiences but the pervasive entity are the instances of naga persecution, initially by the-army- a foreign community; later by their own people. Violence becomes a way of their lives and Naga culture and sovereignty is compromised. Human body becomes a site for perpetrating violence with stories/acts of rape, execution acquiring stark reality. Freedom struggle debases into anarchy.

The loss of normality is reinforced even after the Shillong Peace treaty. Mose’s shop is vandalized years later after he quit the underground. He left underground but underground didn’t leave him. It’s debris endangered his life even after his separation from it. The chaotic streak that underground generated among later generation of Nagas becomes lethal for Mose, who is attacked surrepticiously, by a bunch of hooligans, who vandalize his shop branding him a traitor. Hence, the precarity pervades even when one has completely dismantled oneself from war. Every war is fought on pretext of a cause- a cause which governs the life of its believers. When the war ends and there is cease fire, the

conflicts within the groups drive individuals to mete out violence over its counterpart. The war ends but its remnants continue to exist and therefore the war never finishes. As a result, the ideology that one nurtures during the war becomes extremely important, with an individual always deemed vulnerable before opposition. Precarity stems from such conflict of ideologies. For Mose, the cause had not come to fruition, therefore it was futile to be a part of underground. But not everyone took his acclimatization to normalcy sportingly, hence, the attack on him and his shop. Mose feared exposing his vulnerabilities to his daughter Sabunuo, contemplating, if the knowledge of his past would endanger her as well. "How much could they tell her? If they hid the truth from her, would it endanger her as well?"(Kire 140). War renders individuals prone to surveillance- like physical searches, headcounting etc. In order to combat surveillance, the underground members hid from the public eye. Being visible made them non-vulnerable. Invisibility vulnerable. Their physical absence was taken as a threat to army, who kept a tab of their physical presence day by day. The visits of boys from the underground turned nocturnal. Daytime visibility became a threat. Their existence became hidden, invisible because of the conflict. The atmosphere of constant surveillance with no privacy and nothing personal, pervaded with everything at the mercy of the people in power. Vilau warns Mose against hiding contentious papers in their house while the army conducted searches.

A fifty year long exposure to a warlike environment emerged as pernicious influence on the subconscious of citizens of Nagaland. Psychological implications of war hold primacy because of their perennial imprints. Partaking violence damaged their psyche and altered their selves. The obscurity regarding the duration of the cause rendered their existence as immaterial and non-existent for their family. The underground tactics, the guerilla warfare, the rigorous training and erratic movements generated in their psyche a constant feeling of alertness and unrest. The unpredictability of their next move and that of their opponent consumed their psyche so much so that it left an indelible imprint upon their minds for the rest of their lives. This is another aspect which Kire highlights in the text, the idea that nothing ends with wars, the psychological impression, remnants that it leaves upon the war veterans, the victims, the aggressors is much more devastating because of its non ephemeral nature. Wars are transient, but Nagaland is portrayed to be in a perpetual state of war-an invisible psychological war. Also, the Underground encouraged its members to fight, instilling hatred in them against the army, by informing about the genocide perpetrated by the army. This brainwashing aimed at indulgence in constant war, hardened the people of Nagaland to an extent that weapons became their method of communicating instead of words. The rivalry between state and people developed a chronic feeling for fighting war; acclimatizing them to weapons so much so that it became an asset of their mundane existence.

However grim, the chronicling of one's past for posterity, is, essential. Bankimchandra Chatterjee has voiced, "We must have a history". This proclamation qualifies as a clarion call to attribute history an integral constituent of our cultural past. Having a history provides an identity which is deeply situated in past, and a heritage, which is a product of past. Kire's attempt is to bring up the precarious history of the Nagas to the forefront. Kire portrays Naga history as a scarred history. A history whose past

was maligned by war and whose present engulfed by factionalism. Mose was a victim of the same. His shop was vandalized, and him, brutally beaten by factional members(basically breakaway groups from the underground who revenged against previous underground members by murdering them). Their lives continued being precarious owing to factionalism. How this precarity affects the sanity of their existence, is aptly voiced by Mose's wife, Neilhounuo, "You could close the shop, you know...." "What? How would we live then? asks Mose... "you're too easy a target if you are in the shop everyday".(Kire 143). This insistence on changing one's lifestyle, compromise with one's livelihood just to stay safe reduces the quality of their socio-cultural relations.

This factional terror group consisting of Nagas was called, National Socialist Council of Nagaland. Kire blames the rampant factionalism as the defeat of the Naga cause. Neituo makes a pertinent point, "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) Factional groups targeted previous underground members. Kire writes, "it made them change their lifestyles. Among the threatened people, were, prominent men of their clans and the clans appointed young men to guard them outside the village area." A graduate who joined underground and attempted to reconcile the infighting was shot down by the newly emergent socialist members of underground faction. Kire writes, "People who heard how he had been killed said that those who would shoot fine men like that would certainly not stop at anything. But why are they doing it? What will they gain by it? Power, for one," said Neituo in a low voice. "This is a Marxist technique, rule the masses by terrorising them,"(Kire 147). Neituo labels their sole motive as terrorisation of its people and the seizure of power.

This shift in dynamics of power is elemental for comprehending Naga national history. Power is a good slave but a poor master. This phrase characterises both the army and the factional members. Army is represented as a repressive state apparatus. Power provided it the liberty to unleash corporal punishments to its respective ally. Corporal punishments became a common way of subduing, intimidating, controlling public lives. Common people found guilty of endorsing directly or indirectly anti government beliefs and sentiments, or something tangible and concrete(like papers of naga freedom fighters), were susceptible of arrests and physical retribution by the army.

The government legitimizes the actions of army by branding it as a prerequisite to its subject's welfare. Government projects an image, where it seeks to act as protective agency whose purpose is to safeguard the normalcy of its citizens and their physical beings. It achieves that by establishing a structured form of power. According to Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, structured power is about controlling brute and physical force. He describes the effects of war on a society, ascertaining the need for a common power, a strong state.(Routledge 116) Hobbes juxtaposes the lack of state power to a situation of war. He writes... "it is manifest, that during the times men live without a common power...they are in that condition which is called War." (Routledge 116) Hobbes describing the state of war likewise, "In such condition, there is no place for industry..., no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worse of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life

of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”(Routledge 116) The power that was seized by the central government is later claimed by aggressors from the factions. Neituo comments on this shift of power, “they just need an excuse to seize power” (Kire 145). Execution of unfair power results in a collapse of personal/cultural lives of Nagas. Mose was a family man. His routine consisted of helping his mother Vilau on the field, invest time in academics, but all these became insignificant when he joined the underground, and trained to be a fighter. His demeanour, psyche underwent a transformation. He and neituo both developed predatory alertness and attacking prowess. The Underground became a warehouse of producing singular, homogenized warriors with a single goal in mind- to fight and defeat the army. He is cutoff from his social, cultural life. He leaves his family and normal existence to lead a camouflaged, clandestine existence. Their lives, hence, no longer remained individual personal lives but transform into a polarized national identity- aggressor/pacifier. The personal becomes public and political. This intrusion of private space is marred by a constant fear of being branded as an opponent, traitor, conspirator. It also shows the way state power controls the lives of its civilians thus completely sabotaging their autonomous existences.

The text also facilitates a new historicist reading of the Naga past. Mose goes through the documents of his grandfather which is Kire’s way of rendering the Naga national cause (or the fight for Naga freedom) a trans-historical dimension. The documents take the Naga demand for sovereignty, back to the days of Simon Commission(1929). The trajectory of Naga history is contextualized in the nationalist history by showing a causal relation between prime events in Indian history and Naga fight for independence. The unheard history of Naga fight for separation from Indian continent is a cry of recognition for their own homeland. The memory of freedom struggle is delivered through the memories of Mose. The changes that happen in the social and political domain of Nagaland, parallelise with experiences of Mose’s. Mose grows up with the Naga freedom struggle and dies on the fringes of its culmination. The way he is brought up; his daughter and grandson, all reflect the culture and ethos of Naga village/life. That peaceful existence which symbolises Naga life is yearned and settles as the ultimate aim of Naga Community, “If only some lasting peace would return to their land so that they could raise their children in peace! The struggle had now gone beyond its twentieth year and there was still no end in site”, muses Neilhounuo. ...Twenty one years without any respite. Or any lasting solutions.”(Kire 113)

In Post-colonial times, precarity of a northeastern is governed by the missing sense of relatability that exists pan India with the Nagas in particular, and the northeast people, in general. Until ten years back, individuals from northeast travelling to other regions of India for education, business, faced persecution in the guise racial slur, physiognomic mockery, sexual vulnerability etc. The exposure to northeast as a part of India has become socially acceptable only recently. People of other community look at the northeast doubtfully, misconstrue their intentions, deem their action conspicuous, eventually leading to a lack of a sense of empathy with them. The reason is also the cultural gap/barrier that exists between them. Because of this, it becomes indispensable to usher in such voices from the periphery, and

accommodate them in the mainstream discourse. Their existence should be certified, validated by promulgating such narratives. Since, Nagaland was forced to become an Indian state, therefore the onus is on us to sensitise other states to the Naga existence, their culture and a cultivate knowledge of their history. The grand-narratives of Partition of India, Emergency are known to one and all, but the unheard persecution inundated in Naga history, needs to be promulgated throughout public and academic discourses. Here is humanity's ultimate challenge: to recognise the cultured forms of human activity and wants that have brought us to this precarious situation; and second, to search new creative means to work together in pursuit of a differently ordered, collectively hopeful, future.

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