Research article

Echoes of Insurgency: Tracing Cultural Trauma in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*
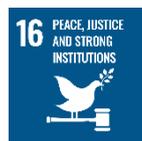
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Abstract

Northeast India has long been recognized as a significant hotspot of violence and communal conflict within India. The region's picturesque beauty bears the indelible scars of communal riots, brutal violence, and a profound identity crisis. The literary works emerging from this region reflect the ongoing pain, inequality, trauma, humiliation, violence, displacement, suffering, and loss experienced by the communities living there. This paper explores the traumatic narratives of the Naga people, focusing on Easterine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), which portrays the insurgency period and its aftermath in Nagaland. The novel depicts the impact of the Indo-Naga conflict through the perspective of Mose, the protagonist, who becomes a soldier in the freedom movement during his teenage years. The narrative addresses central issues such as collective trauma, shared memory and identity, and the marginalization of the Naga people, who are often excluded from mainstream Indian narratives. Kire's narrative illustrates the physical wounds inflicted during the insurgency period and brings forth the psychological and degenerative effects of violence on its people. The analysis adopts Cultural Trauma Theory, as proposed by Jeffrey Alexander, to investigate the profound impact of insurgency on the cultural identity of individuals and how cultural trauma shapes their collective memory. The study highlights the role of literature in amplifying the traumatized voices of the marginalized, with Kire's work serving as a powerful example. Furthermore, Kire voices the perspectives of those pushed to the margins, thereby aiming to reduce the prevalent inequalities within India. Thus, Kire's novel underscores the resilient nature of its people, who continue to seek a better future despite such traumatic circumstances.

Keywords: Northeast Literature, Inequality, Marginalization, Violence, Trauma Theory, Resilience

Introduction

But to-day,
I no longer know my hills,
The birdsong is gone,
Replaced by the staccato,
Of sophisticated weaponry.

- Temsula Ao, "My Hills", 2013

The Northeast region of India, despite its beauty and picturesque landscapes, has experienced significant political disruptions, ethnic conflicts, and sustained violence. The violence in this region is directly associated with insurgencies arising from demands for autonomy, independence, and self-assertion. Such turmoil has profoundly impacted the lives of individuals in the area. This violence not only affects the community physically but also leaves its members psychologically and culturally traumatized. Specifically, the insurgency in Nagaland has been referred to as the "mother of all insurgencies in the Northeast" (Sinha, 2004, as cited in Kumar, 2023), as it has evolved from decades of political uprisings and social strife against the Indian state. While the country acknowledges the persistent unrest in the Northeast region of India, there still remains a notable lack of discussion and understanding regarding these issues in the Northeast. Consequently, the region has lost its tranquil and peaceful atmosphere due to ongoing political and social upheaval.

The present study focuses on analysing the traumatic narratives of the Naga people with reference to Easterine Kire's novel *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), which provides a poignant portrayal of the insurgency period and its aftermath in Nagaland. The novel depicts the impact of the Indo-Naga conflict through the perspective of Mose, the protagonist, who becomes a soldier in the freedom movement during his teenage years. The narrative addresses central issues such as collective trauma, shared memory and identity, and the marginalisation of the Naga people, who are often excluded from mainstream Indian narratives. Employing the Cultural Trauma Theory framework by Jeffrey C. Alexander, this paper analyses how the violent insurgency in Nagaland not only wounds people physically but also leave psychological and degenerative scars.

Historical Context of the Naga Conflict

The indigenous community of Nagaland, known as the Naga people, was colonised by the British in the nineteenth century. On the eve of India's Independence Day, 14 August 1947, Angami Zapu Phizo, often regarded as the "Father of the Naga Nation", proclaimed Nagaland's independence from India. Like many other indigenous communities, such as the Garo, Khasi, and Bodo, the Nagas also longed to establish a separate nation rather than become part of the Indian state. Ethnically, culturally, socially, geographically, and historically distinct from other Indian populations, the Nagas have always considered having an independent nation for themselves. During British colonial rule, the British sought to assert dominance over Nagaland, keeping the Nagas isolated from the rest of the country due to their unique characteristics. They implemented the Inner Line Permit (ILP), a special boundary permit that non-indigenous individuals were required to obtain to enter the state of Nagaland. In the

post-independence era, this practice also continues to be followed in various regions of the Northeast. In this context, G.N. Devy raises concerns regarding the marginalization of Indigenous communities during both the pre- and post-independence eras in his book *A Nomad Called Thief* (2006). He writes, "Tribes have remained trapped in the debris of colonial history, which first marked them out as the most rebellious and then labelled them as the most primitive communities" (2006, p. 11).

On August 15, 1947, when India attained freedom from British colonial rule, the newly formed government made Nagaland an independent state within India. This decision sparked resistance, violence, resentment, and protests among the local community, who felt it was a violation of their rights (Sema 2012). The situation worsened when, in 1975, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (hereafter AFSPA) was enacted by the Indian government, which granted Indian military forces the power to handle the turmoil and insurgency, which further escalated the violence in the region. It also contributed to a significant conflict between the local population and the authorities. The local community criticized the Indian government's decision and accused the military of violating their rights. Under these circumstances, the phrase "We are Nagas by birth, Indians by accident" has become a common expression among the indigenous tribes of Nagaland.

Bertil Lintner asserts in *Great Game East* (2012) that the Nagas were the first group in independent India to challenge the 'idea of India' (p. 63). Characterized by a distinct ethnicity, identity, and cultural society, Nagaland is home to numerous indigenous tribes. This state has historically remained isolated from the mainstream regions of India due to its geography and lack of connectivity. Since becoming part of independent India, the Nagas have grappled with various issues related to self-assertion, sovereignty, independence, and freedom. They have also initiated several separatist acts and freedom struggles against the Indian state. (Kikhi 92)

It has been more than five decades, but the suffering of the people of Nagaland has not yet ended. Innocent civilians of this conflict-prone region complain of "arbitrary killings and torture, fake encounters and disappearances, rape of women, molestation and other alleged excesses" (Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 2005, pp. 54-55). According to the report titled *The Naga Nation and Its Struggle Against Genocide* (1986) by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), since 1956, almost 100,000 Nagas have been killed in their fight with India. Between 1955 and 1957, nearly 79,794 houses were burned and approximately 26,550,000 mounds of paddy were destroyed (Global Naga Forum, 2023). The perpetual violence in Nagaland has resulted in significant loss of life, disrupted the social fabric of the community, and inflicted psychological and cultural trauma on the local population. Families that once coexisted peacefully have experienced internal displacement, faced financial hardships, and are now living under the shadow of insurgency. Another striking example of gruesome and violent killings is mentioned in the report by the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre (1995), which states that a brutal series of killings took place in Kohima city on March 5, 1995, when AFSPA soldiers misunderstood the sound of a tire bursting as a bomb blast. After hearing the sound, the soldiers indiscriminately began to shoot for an hour, resulting in the deaths of about seven innocent civilians,

including two girls aged three and eight. Among the twenty-two gravely injured individuals, seven were minors.

This whirlpool of violence has also exerted an effect on the youth of the state, who are now coping with generational trauma, growing up with a looming sense of marginalization, and persistently grappling with violence. Kadena (2024) notes that particularly the older generation of Nagaland shows signs of mental health issues, as they are the ones "who have borne the brunt of the violence in the region since AFSPA's inception." He further observes that such horrific tales of violence, displacement, and atrocity weave together "multiple generatikos," which also give rise to "intergenerational trauma."

Literature emerging from violence-prone regions attempts to rewrite history and gives voice to the other side of the story. Such literature narrativizes common people's traumatic experiences, with Naga writers like Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Avinuo Kire chronicling their people's tales amid insurgency and conflict. For instance, Easterine Kire (b. 1959), in the introduction of her book *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), mentions the real-life rape incident that took place in a Naga village on July 11, 1971. With the intent to defile the sacred church, the Maratha contingent raped four minor girls in a church that was a place of worship for the villagers. Since this incident, the villagers have abandoned the church building. Similar instances can also be traced through the short stories of Temsula Ao (1945-2022), a celebrated Naga writer who has authored remarkable short story collections, including *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006) and *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). In these collections, she brings to the fore the suppressed stories of Naga women who have always been marginalized. The short story "The Last Song" in the collection *These Hills Called Home* centres around Apenyo, a minor girl who is brutally raped and killed by the armed forces only because she mustered the courage to sing a song for a special occasion. Ao's women characters, such as Jemtila in "The Curfew Man" and Khatila in "The Jungle Major", represent the traumatic experiences and challenges of surviving in a conflict-prone region. Ao uses narrative techniques such as repetition and flashbacks that are experienced by her characters after being tortured by the armed forces. Through these narratives, the Naga authors highlight the profound effects of insurgency on the social, cultural, and psychological well-being of the Naga people while also addressing the trauma ingrained in their collective consciousness.

Trauma and Cultural Trauma Theory: An Overview

The term "trauma" is derived from the Greek word "traumatikos," which signifies a physical wound to an individual's body. Historically, the concept of trauma was primarily associated with physical harm; however, its definition has evolved over time. In contemporary times, trauma is understood as an injury to a person's psyche. Sigmund Freud articulates this notion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), stating that trauma involves "any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (p. 23). Explaining the Freudian concept, Caruth states that Freud characterized trauma as "harm inflicted not on the body but on the mind" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Any catastrophic event that causes trauma penetrates the

individual's protective shield of the psyche, resulting in psychological injury rather than physical harm.

Trauma studies in literature draw heavily from the postulates of Sigmund Freud, who in his work *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896) posited that traumatic memories are often repressed and pushed out of consciousness due to their distressing nature. Freud (1939) also noted that the symptoms associated with trauma may persist for a long time, even when the event is over, and often resurface in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. His psychoanalytical model provided critical insights into repressed memories, traumatic neurosis, and the inherent complexities in the nature of trauma. While earlier studies of trauma were influenced by Freud and his psychoanalytical model, which emphasized the personal dimension of trauma, contemporary models focus on collective and cultural trauma, highlighting how communities collectively derive meaning and process trauma. This shift acknowledges that although trauma is a personal affliction, it is also a social and cultural phenomenon that shapes collective memory and identity. In this context, American sociologist Kai T. Erikson, in his seminal work *Everything in Its Path: The Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (1976), defines individual trauma and collective trauma:

> By *individual trauma* I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively.
>
> By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality... it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared... "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. "You" continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body (Erikson, 1976, p. 187).

Linked to this concept is Jeffrey Alexander's notion of "Cultural Trauma", as articulated in the edited volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004), co-authored with other contributors. Alexander lays out the framework of "Cultural Trauma Theory" and defines the concept as:

> Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander, 2004, p. 1).

According to him, for cultural trauma to occur, the members of a specific culture must perceive that they have experienced a profound event that poses a potential threat to their identity and memory. He asserts, "First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (Alexander, 2004, p. 13). Within his theoretical framework, what imparts the event its traumatic value is not its magnitude or number of casualties but rather the way the event is understood, narrated, perceived, and integrated into group consciousness. For Cultural Trauma theorists, the process of meaning-making becomes significant, as "it is the meaning that provides

the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves. Whether or not the structures of meaning are destabilized and shocked is not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process" (Alexander, 2004, p. 10).

Alexander (2004, p. 10), in his discussion of Cultural Trauma Theory, identifies and lays out specific steps that govern the meaning-making process of trauma among the members of collectivity. These steps are as follows:

- Claim Making: Social agents engage in the decision-making process and broadcast symbolic representations to the members of collectivity. Claim-making constitutes a process through which a painful and profound experience is transformed into a culturally acknowledged trauma.
- Carrier Groups: It refers to a social group that takes the responsibility of identifying, interpreting, and communicating the meaning of the event and making claims. The carrier group may include elites, religious leaders, marginalized classes, etc.
- Speech Act Theory: It refers to the use of linguistic and symbolic representations by claim makers to socially construct the meaning of a terrible event. This theoretical framework highlights the crucial role of language in communicating trauma. It includes various forms of expressions, including speeches by the carrier groups and media representations, to articulate the event as a collective trauma (2004, pp. 11-12).

Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*: A Journey from Idealism to Disillusionment

Bitter Wormwood (2011) by Easterine Kire is a poignant narrative that explores the socio-political upheaval in Nagaland, a northeastern Indian state, through the experiences of the protagonist, Mose. The novel chronicles several decades, illustrating the effects of the Naga insurgency on both individuals and their communities. The novel opens with Mose, a young boy in a small Nagaland village during the 1940s. He lives a peaceful life with his family, which respects Naga culture and traditions. This peace is shattered when political turmoil arises as Nagaland wants independence from India. The Naga nationalist movement gains strength, pulling Mose into the heart of this historical struggle. As Mose matures, he experiences the harsh realities of the insurgency. Motivated by youthful passion and a commitment to his community, he joins the Naga fight for freedom. However, the situation escalates into violence, transforming his once peaceful life into one filled with fear and grief. Villages are destroyed, lives are lost, and families are separated as the Indian military intensifies its efforts against the insurgents. Amid the turmoil, Mose builds an emotional connection with his cousin Neibou and a romantic relationship with Atuonuo. These ties provide him comfort in a chaotic environment. However, they are also impacted by the ongoing conflict, leading to the loss of loved ones and forced separations. As time goes on, Mose grows more disheartened by the relentless violence and suffering. The aspirations of the nationalist movement remain unmet, leaving the community divided. The novel concludes with Mose, as an old man, reflecting on the years of conflict that have influenced his life and homeland. Through Mose's journey, Easterine Kire emphasises the strength of the human spirit and the desire for peace despite years of hardship.

Jeffrey Alexander's Interpretative Framework: Insights into *Bitter Wormwood*

Jeffrey Alexander, in his theory, states the significance of cultural crisis in causing cultural trauma. According to him:

> For traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, the social crisis must become a cultural crisis. … Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go. (2004, p. 10)

Alexander's argument posits that the event, in and of itself, is not inherently traumatic. Rather, it becomes traumatic through the aftermath it creates in the specific cultural context and how society remembers and interprets it. This interpretative process, in turn, shapes the collective psyche and identity of the community. The members collectively mourn the loss and attempt to derive meaning from their social pain. This process also involves acknowledging their pain and suffering, which becomes central to their group identity and consciousness.

In *Bitter Wormwood*, the process of grappling with violence within the Naga community becomes evident as they confront the pain and suffering inflicted due to insurgency, rooted in political and military struggle. This violence can be interpreted as a cultural and identity crisis. In other words, the Naga conflict began as a movement to attain freedom and sovereignty. However, it gradually transformed into a cultural crisis that questioned the local community about what it meant to be Naga. Through the struggle for independence, Easterine Kire unveils her people's harsh and traumatic experiences. She depicts the fight for survival through the perspective of Mose, who, at a very young age, witnessed the burning of the village, the rape of women, and the mass killings of his people. The novel opens in 2007 with Mose as an old man reflecting, "It had not begun like that…Memories flooded Mose's mind as he sat out on the porch. No, it had not been like that at all" (Kire, 2011, p. 12). Kire employs the flashback technique to evoke the memories Mose experienced while being at the centre of the struggle.

As the novel opens, the pervasive atmosphere of violence becomes evident, leading to the total disintegration of the social fabric. Kire conveys this stark reality by writing, "The streets were deserted now. House-owners has hastily locked their doors…The deathly stillness of yet another day brought to a close by a sudden killing brooded over the town" (2011, p. 8). Kire, through the character of Mose, articulates a profound sense of pain and anguish as he witnesses the disintegration of Naga society. Kire writes, "Mose walked slowly… the almost daily killings, the young men on the streets calloused by hate and shouting at everyone in sight and the complete collapse of cultural life. It was unbelievable that it could come to this, thought Mose" (2011, p. 9-10). This passage exemplifies the essence of cultural crisis and disintegration within the Naga community. The pervasive violence and social unrest have resulted in the experience of cultural trauma among the Naga people. This also highlights that Mose, a representative of the Nagas, feels the erasure of the community's traditions, culture, and values. It is also suggestive that the external happenings have indelibly impacted the collective psyche of the Naga people.

In a similar context, Kire expresses her experiences regarding the brutality and horrors associated with living under the constant surveillance of Indian military forces. In an interview conducted by Swati Daftaur for *The Hindu*, Kire states:

> From 2000 to early 2005, I personally experienced the stress of living in a house that was stalked by armed … The brutality of life in Nagaland, especially the brutalization of many young men, made me fear for the safety of my children. My older daughter was traumatized on a short trip when their car was stopped and they were held for questioning by a group holding them at gunpoint. Her sister came within five meters of being shot when armed men began to indiscriminately fire at the human target, felling an innocent citizen (Daftuar, 2021, p. 3).

Jeffery Alexander posits that certain steps in the social process ultimately determine the nature of collective actions undertaken by the victimized community. First in the process is claim-making, wherein the social agents make "claims" about the shape of social reality…The cultural construction of trauma begins with such a claim" (Alexander, 2004, p. 11). In *Bitter Wormwood*, claim-making can be interpreted as the means through which groups and individuals voice their pains and sufferings resulting from perpetual violence. These groups articulate their collective suffering and trauma, which become central to their community's identity and memory. Characters such as Mose, Khrienuo, and Vilau frame the violence that lurks around their community as much more than individual suffering. Such violence poses a threat to their cultural identity and existence. For instance, Vilau, Mose's mother, warns him of the dangers that lurk in the streets during the curfew: "These are dangerous times, son. What if something had happened to you?" (Kire, 2011, p. 59).

Another instance of the characters asserting their claims can be observed when Mose and Neituo decide to join the Underground. The claim-making process in this context involves direct participation in the freedom struggle and propagating the same to their people. The process begins when young Mose and Neituo witness the brutality of the army firsthand, and they observe the killing of men in front of them. Kire describes:

> 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 at them. One man lay unconscious on the ground, but the soldiers did not stop kicking him in the head…For both, it was horrifying to see and that they were still trembling when they neared their houses. 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 (2011, p. 79).

Mose and Neituo's testimony to this horrific sight is significant as it not only proves the savagery of the soldiers but also confirms the abstract accounts of violence they heard. Neituo states, "They kill a few to put fear in the rest to prevent them from helping the Underground" (2011, p. 67). Within the framework of Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory, this moving narrative testifies to ruthless violence and depicts the transformation of social crises into cultural trauma as it impacts the collective psyche and identity of the Naga community.

According to Alexander, claim-makers assert "claim to some fundamental injury" (2004, p. 11), and a carrier group articulates these assertions. Carrier groups possess both "ideal and material interests" (2004, p. 11), and they aim to identify, interpret, and

transmit the horrifying experience so that it gets acknowledged as a cultural trauma. A carrier group may comprise elites, religious leaders, marginalized classes, and others. In the context of *Bitter Wormwood*, there are vivid illustrations of the role of these carrier groups. The Underground functions as a significant carrier group, portraying itself as a protector of the Naga community. This group takes charge of identifying, interpreting, transmitting, and responding to the atrocities perpetrated by the army. This group consists of the Naga people, who emerge as militants against the domination of the Indian army. The Underground acts as a resistance group in the freedom struggle and propagates the trauma inflicted on their community. Characters such as Mose and Neituo are drawn to join the group to participate in the fight for their people's freedom actively.

What reinforces the trauma and zeal to join the Underground in Mose is the death of his grandmother, Khrienuo. During the raid conducted by the army men, she is killed instantly after being shot by them.

> The bullet that had entered the back of her head had killed her. Vilau's cries brought people running from the neighbouring fields. They tried to revive Khrienuo, but it was too late…That was the sight that met Mose's eyes when he was coming to meet his mother and grandmother. There was no sign of his grandmother…His mother looked like a frenzied wretch, beating her chest and throwing her body cloth away when she caught sight of him (Kire, 2011, p. 71).

Witnessing his grandmother's death profoundly traumatized Mose, as he "…watched in disbelief. Then he cried and cried like a child" (Kire, 2011, p. 71). This incident left an indelible mark on his psyche and showcased a striking reality of the Naga struggle for independence. The neighbourhood community, which witnessed Khrienuo's death and subsequently became the bearer of the tragic news, also functions as a carrier group. They try to tell Mose about the killing: "Soldiers. We have seen them for the past five days in our woods…We thought that if they saw us peacefully cultivating our fields then they would not harm us…It happened so fast. One of the shots hit your grandmother. I'm sorry lad, this is such a terrible thing" (Kire, 2011, p. 71). The community perceives Khrienuo's death as much more than a personal loss, as one of Mose's aunts says, "All of us are mourning her" (Kire, 2011, p. 73). Her sudden and tragic end becomes a turning point in the novel as Kire, through her death, emphasises the omnipresent fear and danger that contribute to collective and cultural trauma.

Thus, carrier groups in *Bitter Wormwood* play a significant role in testifying and articulating the cultural trauma inflicted upon the community. As a carrier group, the Underground seeks to reclaim its land and identity. They articulate the community's suffering under Indian rule and frame it within a unified narrative of cultural trauma. The involvement of younger characters, such as Mose and Neituo, joining the Underground also reflects the continuity the organisation aims to sustain. Characters such as Mose, Neituo, Vilau, and the neighbours who witness physical violence firsthand contribute to the narrative of cultural trauma as they highlight the domination of the army and the suffering endured by the Naga people. Through such shared experiences, the Nagas transcend individual suffering and become "subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness,

marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2004, p. 1).

While discussing Cultural Trauma Theory, Alexander asserts that in order to create a compelling master narrative of trauma, it must include these four elements: the nature of the pain, the identity of the victim, the relationship between the trauma victim and the broader audience, and the attribution of responsibility (2004, pp. 13-15).

The nature of pain and the nature of the victim address these questions - "What actually happened" and "What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain?" respectively (Alexander, 2004, p. 13). In *Bitter Wormwood*, the fundamental cause of violence and suffering is the conflict between the Indian state and the Naga people, who are demanding their independence. The victims are identified as the Naga community, as the novel depicts a wide array of characters who endure injustice at the hands of the Indian army. The cause of violence and turmoil becomes evident as Mose and Neituo discuss what they heard at school:

> 'Naga Independence' was one of the phrases he [Mose] had heard. It stuck with him for the next many days. He mentioned it to Neituo to school. "What did they mean by that?" asked Mose. "Father says there is a group of people asking to be separate from India," replied Neituo.
> "Well, that shouldn't be hard, should it?" Mose asked. "Father was also saying that the group has gone to meet Gandhi. They will tell him that the Nagas want their own nation" (Kire, 2011, p. 42).

Kire vividly portrays the harrowing experiences of the victimized community that endured violence, including killings, beatings, the burning of villages, and other brutalities perpetrated by soldiers. In the novel, Neituo informs Mose about the damage caused by the soldiers: "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, 2011, p. 66). The occurrence of such incidents left both Mose and Neituo completely shocked and horrified.

The novel describes the pain and suffering experienced by the Nagas, the victims of deliberate violence and oppression by the Indian army. This systemic violence has threatened their sense of security and collective identity, further contributing to profound cultural trauma. Kire, through her work, illustrates how her community grapples with everyday violence. The common people feel vulnerable and insecure because of the looming fear in which they are entrapped. Kire articulates this stark reality:

> Common people are caught between the Underground and the army. There is no relief to them. They are either tortured by the army or by the factions of the Underground. People were tired of the killings resulting out of the clashes between the factions. Mose affirms that "Everyone is sick of it, all these killings. But no one has the guts to do anything about it" (2011, p. 9).

The most devastating and heart-wrenching incident in the novel occurs when the protagonist, Mose, is shot. Mose is depicted as a wise elder who "devoted his best years to the Naga cause, and in old age, had endeavoured to teach the values of their

culture to his grandchildren" (2011, p. 226). While trying to save a Bihari *paan* shopkeeper from extortionists, Mose is tragically shot. Kire describes his tragic death:

> "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...Mose died instantly. The Bihari boy cradled Mose's head on his lap and called out for help (2011, p. 224).

Mose's death is a poignant portrayal of the fragility of life within the Naga community. His passing is not merely an individual loss; rather, it symbolises the enduring conflict and violence that have impacted the Naga people over decades. Under the framework of Cultural Trauma Theory, Mose's death exemplifies the nature of pain – including both physical violence and other forms of brutality – as well as the nature of the victims it befalls, that is, the Nagas.

The third element in Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory discusses the relationship of the trauma victim to the wider audience. It answers the question: "To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group?" (Alexander, 2004, p. 14). This can be illustrated in *Bitter Wormwood* when the Bihari paan seller witnesses Mose die. Mose's death shows the far-reaching effects of the violence as not only did his community mourn his death but also the Bihari boy who did not belong to this community. "The Bihari paan seller was distraught at the tragic turn of events. "Baba, Baba," he would wail...he kept blaming himself for the killing. Every morning, he came to the grave and wept over it and then returned to his shop" (Kire, 2011, p. 226). His deep sorrow and gratitude are seen in the novel as he takes care of Mose's grave and brings gifts of food for Mose's wife. Kire, by bringing in a non-native character in the novel, shows how humans are tied by the thread of humanity that binds across borders and how people interconnect and stand for each other in times of crisis.

The last element within Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory framework is the attribution of responsibility, which includes identifying the perpetrator, the "antagonist" (Alexander, 2003, p. 15). In *Bitter Wormwood*, the perpetrators are the military soldiers, characterized as agents of violence, oppression, and other inhumane acts. Under the Assam Maintenance of Public Order Act 1953, the perpetrators in the novel are empowered to "shoot and kill, in case it is felt necessary to do so for maintaining the public order" (Kire, 2011, p. 73). Through such references, Kire sheds light on Nagaland's power dynamics and current state of affairs. The violence inflicted on individuals such as Mose and his grandmother emphasises the profound impact and lasting scars of oppression on the collective psyches of the Naga people.

In his Cultural Trauma Theory, Alexander emphasises the media's role in the representation of the trauma process, asserting that it "allows traumas to be expressively dramatized" (2004, p. 18). In *Bitter Wormwood*, radio and newspaper are crucial mediums as they are the only gateways connecting the local people to the outside world. Mose's family relies solely on the radio to access news updates: "Vilau and Mose put the radio on to see if there would be any mention of these strange happenings in their land" (Kire, 2011, p. 68).

However, "Behind every angry mob there is a puppeteer pulling the strings" (Rubin, as cited in Smith, 2025). In the chapter titled "Distorted Truths", the misrepresentation of information by media sources comes to the surface. The faction group 'taxed' the people who were officegoers and extorted twenty-five percent of their salaries. Amidst the insurgency, such criminal activities escalated, intensifying the feelings of insecurity and vulnerability among the Naga population. The following morning, this issue was reported in *The Indian Express*: ""Civilians support insurgents in Nagaland," he read out loudly…The journalist had reported that the Naga insurgents actively received help from the civilian population who donated money to their cause" (Kire, 2014, p. 164).

Mose shares his disgust on the subject as he feels that the media is using the Naga struggle only "to get a story in the papers" (Kire, 2014, p. 165). The media tends to portray Naga's independence struggle as a mere conflict and tries to minimise their suffering and grievances. This distortion and manipulation of truth denies their opportunity to articulate their pain, agony, and trauma on a national scale. By scaling down the Naga struggle for independence, the media further marginalises the Nagas, creating hindrances in voicing their pangs of misery to the broader audience. Mose expresses his anguish, stating, "The Indian media is cleverly twisting the struggle into something else. No one is genuinely interested in ending it…our great struggle for independence has been reduced to a mere story. You think anyone really cares about the people suffering on the account of it?" (Kire, 2014, p. 165)

Robert Fisk in the Preface to his book *The Great War for Civillisaion* (2005) opines, "War is primarily not about victory or defeat but about death and the infliction of death. It represents the total failure of the human spirit" (p. xvii). A similar ordeal is explored by Kire, where she highlights the experience of a soldier "who went berserk and shot his officer" (Kire, 2014, p. 165), thereby highlighting the psychological war trauma of a soldier. Kire is a sensible writer who profoundly reflects on the human suffering amidst the violence. She poignantly addresses the psychological toll that violence takes on the basic fabric of human society. She brings in the death of soldiers to highlight the deep psychological and emotional scars that those involved in war carry. Neituo, while discussing the death of soldiers with Mose, says, "Think of the psychological damage they undergo when they have seen what they have seen. People killed like cattle, the same people they had been told were their fellow citizens. It must leave them with a terrible weight on their conscience afterwards" (Kire, 2014, p. 165).

In an online interview by Lalthansangi Ralte taken on October 13, 2020, Easterine Kire states that she collected the experiences and memories of people of Mose's generation. The process of writing *Bitter Wormwood* was a 'cathartic experience' for Kire as she lived through and witnessed the violence and factional killings that afflicted her community. She grew up in Nagaland, and her life was profoundly influenced by nationalistic movements to set the Nagas free. She states, "The way I wrote *Bitter Wormwood* was to try to live through the lives of the people first affected by the Naga freedom struggle, which we also refer to as the Naga movement. I had, by that time, worked a great deal on the political movement via data collection from oral narrators who had lived the struggle. Mose has a real-life model in an uncle of mine who is still alive. So, the real Mose is 85 and living in Kohima." (Ralte, 2024, pp. 43-44)

Conclusion

Bitter Wormwood by Easterine Kire poignantly captures the Naga struggle, highlighting the profound individual and collective experiences of violence, bloodshed, and trauma. The novel stands as a testament to the suffering endured by the Nagas during the insurgency. The application of Jeffrey Alexander's theory of Cultural Trauma facilitates a scientific and systematic analysis of the novel, fostering sensitivity and a deeper understanding of the subject. This paper explored how personal pain and suffering can transcend individual experiences to create a cultural and collective trauma that deeply resonates with the victimized community. Using the lens of Cultural Trauma Theory, it can be concluded that the Naga struggle for independence not only represents a social crisis but also a cultural crisis that redefines the Naga's sense of belonging and identity. The novel further illustrates how members of collectivity claim their trauma and how they identify, interpret, and articulate these experiences through a carrier group that shapes a compelling trauma narrative.

Through the act of storytelling, *Bitter Wormwood* bears witness to the pain, suffering, trauma, and resilience of the Naga people. It gives voice to those from marginalized regions who have been silenced, ensuring that the trauma of the Naga community is not forgotten. Moreover, by voicing Naga lives caught in turmoil, Kire makes sure that subaltern histories are not erased by those in power. By doing so, her compelling narrative aligns strongly with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal of reducing inequality, as the novel is an outcry from a marginalized community that wants its voices to be heard and recognized. Furthermore, it resonates with the policy of Global Goals, specifically Goal 10: Reduced Inequality, according to which "In order for nations to flourish, equality and prosperity must be available to everyone – regardless of gender, race, religious beliefs or economic status. When every individual is self-sufficient, the entire world prospers" (The Global Goals).

However, Kire concludes the novel on a note of optimism and presents a humane solution to this pressing issue. The novel ends with the new generation – Neibuo, Rakesh, and Himmat – seeking solutions to the Naga insurgency in non-violent ways. It can also be stated that by writing *Bitter Wormwood,* Kire underscores the significant role of literature in bringing to the centre the complexities of insurgency and the voices from the state of Nagaland. In the end, Kire's powerful narrative about her community resonates well with Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" from her poetry collection *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems* (1978):

> You may write me down in history
> With your bitter, twisted lies,
> You may trod me in the very dirt
> But still, like dust, I'll rise. (lines 1-4)

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