

# Peace and Reconciliation in Easterine Kire's Bitter Wormwood: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

*Easterine Kire's novel, Bitter Wormwood, is a powerful portrayal of the Naga freedom struggle and its impact on individuals and communities. Through the protagonist, Mose, and his journey, Kire explores the complexities of conflict, identity, and the quest for peace and reconciliation. The Naga people have been fighting for their independence from India for decades, with the conflict resulting in significant human suffering, displacement, and cultural erasure. Kire's novel is set against this backdrop, delving into the experiences of Mose and his community as they navigate the complexities of the conflict. By tracing Mose's journey, the paper examines his experiences, which mirror the broader struggle for self-determination and the accompanying bitterness and disillusionment. The novel's title, Bitter Wormwood, symbolizes the lingering resentment following a freedom struggle, with the wormwood plant serving as a potent metaphor for the community's bitterness towards the Indian government. This analysis sheds light on how the Naga people's memories reconstruct their freedom struggle, challenging the erasure of their history in the dominant national narrative. Furthermore, it highlights the human toll of armed conflict and emphasizes the need for peace and reconciliation. This paper offers an in-depth analysis of Easterine Kire's novel, Bitter Wormwood, which explores the Naga freedom struggle against Indian dominance through the protagonist Mose's perspective. Set in Nagaland, a region in Northeastern India, the novel delves into the decades-long fight for independence by the indigenous Naga people.*

**Keywords:** Peace, Naga, Reconciliation, Struggle, Conflict

## Introduction

Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* is a compelling narrative that delves into the Naga insurgency's impact on individuals and society. While the novel is steeped in the historical and political dimensions of the conflict, its portrayal of peace and reconciliation stands out as a central theme. Through intricate character development, symbolic imagery, and a nuanced narrative structure, Kire explores the complex journey towards healing and resolution amidst the backdrop of strife. This essay examines how Kire integrates the themes of peace and reconciliation into her narrative, highlighting their significance and manifestation in the novel. Set against the backdrop of the Naga insurgency, the narrative not only addresses the harsh realities of violence but also explores the complex processes of peace and reconciliation. This essay critically examines how Kire portrays these themes through character development, narrative structure, and symbolic elements.

## Contextual Background

Before delving into the analysis, it's essential to understand the historical and cultural context of *Bitter Wormwood*. The Naga insurgency, which began in the mid-20th century, was a protracted struggle for self-determination and autonomy. The conflict's impact on Naga society, including the violence and socio-political upheavals, forms the backdrop of Kire's narrative. Understanding this context is crucial for appreciating the depth of the themes of peace and reconciliation in the novel.

## Historical Context of the Naga Insurgency

### Historical Background

The Naga insurgency, beginning in the mid-20th century, was a significant movement seeking self-determination for the Naga people.

"In the Northeast frontier, the concept of tribe is tied up in the practice of territorial demarcation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As colonial economic interests expanded in the Brahmaputra Valley in what is now Assam, primarily in coal, oil, timber, and tea (Saikia 2004), it became necessary for authorities to demarcate the extent of their territory and to devise mechanisms to control movement in and out. During this period the colonial authorities devised the Inner Line intended to provide uniform administration to territories falling inside the line and leaving the areas outside the line only partially administered, with entry restricted (Baruah 2001)."

The struggle was driven by long-standing grievances related to political representation, cultural preservation, and autonomy. Understanding this context is crucial for interpreting how Kire represents the struggle in her novel.

"Northeast India is on the far eastern frontier of India. It is the ultimate borderland, barely connected to the rest of India and sharing international boundaries with five other nation-states. The frontier is located in the Indian national imaginary as distant, violent, and backward. Its people, especially in the hill areas, are racially distinct from the Indian mainstream, even when accounting for India's diversity. Different tribal and ethnic groups in the Northeast have pursued secessionist and autonomy struggles in the six decades since Indian independence. The region's government, development, and everyday life are militarised, and policy is orchestrated through national security priorities".

### The Impact of Colonial Legacy

Colonial rule and post-independence political developments significantly influenced the Naga insurgency. The imposition of external control and disregard for local autonomy created a backdrop of resistance and conflict. This historical legacy is reflected in the novel's depiction of the Naga people's quest for self-determination. Acharya Amitav opines,

"Crimes against children and crimes against women are the two most menacing indicators capable of creating extreme levels of trauma to the victims and their families. The accumulation of incidences of a variety of crimes committed on women and children — molestation and rape, trafficking, kidnapping, dowry-related harassment and killings — reflects not only a depleting level of social capital, but also a poor level of governance. Such levels of emergent insecurity have many repercussions — economic, social and political — all fraught with instability. Corruption is perhaps the most significant explanatory variable that nullifies a great proportion of effort initiated and adopted (from right policies to money invested) towards the well-being of the society."

## Representation of the Naga Freedom Struggle in *Bitter Wormwood*

### The Protagonist's Perspective

The novel's protagonist, Moses, offers a personal lens through which the Naga freedom struggle is explored. His experiences and transformation reflect the broader narrative of the insurgency.

Moses' early involvement in the insurgency reflects the fervent desire for freedom and the idealism that initially drives many young Naga activists. His participation is fueled by a deep sense of injustice and a hope for a better future. As the conflict progresses, Moses becomes increasingly disillusioned by the violence and the gap between the revolutionary ideals and the harsh realities of insurgent life. This shift highlights the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals caught in the struggle. Amitav suggests.

"The inability of the state to make the right approaches and spend money effectively makes health care prohibitive for people, and children usually bear the brunt. The occurrence of violent incidents and a high prevalence of crimes against women and children make the living space insecure to take initiatives for well-being for a significant section of the population. Corruption prevents development benefits from percolating to the down trodden, and pending court cases dampen and delay the initiatives for human beings to start new ventures".

## **Character Experiences and Their Reflections**

### **Personal Sacrifice and Loss**

The characters in *Bitter Wormwood* often endure personal sacrifice and loss due to the insurgency. These experiences provide insight into the human cost of the struggle. The impact of the insurgency on families and communities is vividly portrayed. Characters face personal tragedies, including loss of loved ones and the fracturing of familial bonds, reflecting the broader societal impact of the conflict. The emotional and psychological toll on individuals involved in the insurgency is a central theme. Characters grapple with guilt, trauma, and the moral complexities of their actions, illustrating the internal struggles that accompany the fight for freedom.

### **Leadership and Ideals**

Leaders within the insurgency, as portrayed in the novel, embody the ideological and strategic dimensions of the struggle. Leaders who initially inspire hope and rally support often face the challenges of maintaining morale and unity amidst the harsh realities of conflict. Their struggles reflect the difficulties in translating revolutionary ideals into practical outcomes. The novel highlights the moral dilemmas faced by leaders and fighters. Decisions that once seemed clear-cut become complicated by the realities of warfare and the impact on civilian lives.

### **The Power of Storytelling**

*Bitter Wormwood* demonstrates the power of storytelling in promoting peace and reconciliation. Kire's use of narrative techniques and oral traditions underscores the importance of sharing stories and experiences in the process of healing and forgiveness.

## **Narrative Structure and Techniques**

### **Use of Flashbacks and Dual Timelines**

Kire employs a non-linear narrative structure, utilizing flashbacks to reveal the protagonist's past and the origins of the conflict. This technique helps readers understand the historical context and the personal motivations behind the characters' actions. Flashbacks provide insight into the events that shaped the current state of conflict, offering a deeper understanding of why reconciliation is challenging yet necessary. The dual timelines allow readers to see the contrast between Moses' past and present, emphasizing his growth and the possibility of change. As Acharya Amitav explores the Naga struggle like, "Evidence shows that a majority of people in Northeast India are in a disadvantageous position to share the benefits of this progressing world. Illiteracy is a contributing factor, but of more concern are the high educational dropout rates and the low levels of educational

attainment leading to poor human capital formation in the region. In the entire region of Northeast India, less than 0.5% of all enrolled students have the opportunity to pursue an education to secure a technical or professional degree or diploma”.

### **Symbolism and Imagery**

Kire's use of symbolism and imagery enhances the thematic depth of the novel. Symbols like the bitter wormwood plant itself represent the pain and suffering caused by conflict but also hint at the potential for healing. The plant symbolizes the bitterness of conflict and the complex process of healing. Its role in the narrative serves as a metaphor for the painful yet necessary process of reconciliation. Natural imagery in the novel often reflects the emotional states of characters and the state of peace or conflict within the community.

### **Themes of Peace and Reconciliation**

Bitter Wormwood explores the theme of peace and reconciliation through Mose's journey, highlighting the human cost of conflict and the need for healing and forgiveness. Kire portrays the struggle for peace as a complex and ongoing process, requiring effort and commitment from individuals and communities. Mose's journey is a powerful exploration of the human search for peace and reconciliation. Through his experiences, Kire highlights the importance of forgiveness, understanding, and empathy in the quest for peace. The novel explores the complex relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness, highlighting the difficulties of forgiving and forgetting in the face of trauma and violence. Kire's portrayal of Mose's struggles with forgiveness and reconciliation offers a nuanced understanding of the human search for peace.

### **Personal Reconciliation**

Kire's portrayal of personal reconciliation highlights the difficulties and triumphs of individuals coming to terms with their past actions. The journey of characters like Moses illustrates the broader theme that peace begins on a personal level. The process of forgiving oneself and others is a recurring theme. The characters' struggles with forgiveness underscore the emotional labor required for reconciliation. The novel depicts healing as a gradual and often painful process, reflecting the complexity of reconciling with one's past and with others.

### **Societal Reconciliation**

On a broader scale, Bitter Wormwood also explores societal reconciliation. The interactions between characters and the community's response to the conflict reflect the challenges of achieving peace in a fractured society. The novel portrays various community efforts to address the aftermath of the conflict, including dialogue and collective action. Kire does not shy away from depicting the difficulties inherent in societal reconciliation, including resistance to change and lingering resentments.

### **Conclusion**

Easterine Kire's Bitter Wormwood offers a profound exploration of peace and reconciliation within the context of the Naga insurgency. Bitter Wormwood examines the intersections of cultural identity, belonging, and peace and reconciliation. Kire's exploration of Naga culture and tradition highlights the significance of cultural heritage in promoting understanding and empathy. Through the development of characters, narrative structure, and symbolic elements, Kire presents a nuanced view of the struggles and possibilities for healing. The novel underscores that reconciliation is a multifaceted process involving both personal and collective efforts. By examining these themes,

Kire not only tells a compelling story but also contributes to a broader understanding of conflict resolution and healing.

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