Peripheral Voices in Easterine Kire’s A Terrible Matriarchy and Bitter Wormwood

Ms. Sharmistha Purkayastha
Reg No: 19113064012003
Full-Time Research Scholar, Department of English and Research Centre
Lekshmipuram College of Arts & Science, Neyoor, K K Dist, Tamil Nadu
Affiliated to M S University, Abishekpati, Tirunelveli

Dr. R. Shirley Fernando
Research Supervisor, Associate Professor of English
Lekshmipuram College of Arts & Science, Neyoor, K K Dist, Tamil Nadu
Affiliated to M S University, Abishekpati, Tirunelveli

Abstract
The Northeast of India has hardly received any attention till recent times due to administrative and political negligence by the centre, which has led to the marginalization of the various groups of people residing in the region. Northeast has become one of India’s post-independent others like many other subaltern groups within the nation. Given the history of violence and insurgency from different pockets of the region, the people from mainland India have grossly misunderstood the tribal people of Northeast and have not made any attempt to comprehend their lives and culture. The literature from this region, with a rich history of oral tradition among many diverse communities inhabiting the Northeast, is attempting to become an instrument to depict the experiences of the people and at the same time provide a platform to the dissenting voices from the region. This paper proposes to explore the peripheral voices of the Naga people protesting against the social ills administered by the Centre that have affected their harmonious living in the society. Easterine Kire in her novels A Terrible Matriarchy and Bitter Wormwood exhibits how the Naga people living in the periphery are discriminated by the centre and what impact it has on their lives.

Keywords: Periphery/Peripheral, Centre, Mainland, Northeast, Tribal

The corpus of literature that emerges from Northeast India is a distinctive voice that remains mostly unheard and goes unnoticed by the people of mainland India. The Northeast of India has been largely ignored and very less attempts have been made to understand the people and their culture by those residing in the rest of the country. The administrative and political negligence by the Centre has led to the marginalization of the various tribal people residing in this peripheral region.

The sweeping term of Northeast is attributed to the eight states lying in the easternmost Northern part of the country for political feasibility. While the use of the term Northeast to homogenize an
essentially diverse region has been vociferously objected by many scholars and the people living there because the eight states within the Northeastern region are so diverse in culture, ethnicity, physical contours and so forth that often people living in adjacent valleys do not understand each others’ tongue. It has to be borne in mind that the term Northeast does not only refer to the directional nature of the region but it is used to refer to a locale with distinct set of people residing in the region, and it is exessively unacceptable to cluster all these disparate states in a single term for political convenience. Margaret Chalthanluangi Zama, a professor of English in Mizoram University, rightfully opines in her article “Mizo Literature: an Overview” (2011):

The northeastern region, which accounts for 7.8 per cent of the total land space of the country, is different from the rest of India in almost every way - be it in terms of culture, tradition, language and ethnicity or of history, physicality, cuisine, dress and indeed, the very cosmology and ethos of life of the people here. This diversity is further reflected within the region itself - each state, and indeed, even each small region within the states, has its own distinct tradition, lore, music, myths, language and even cuisine, though separated by only a few kilometers in physical terms. (7-8)

Given the history of violence and insurgency from different pockets of the region, the stories of the common people who are bearing the brunt of the onslaught have not been heard. On the contrary, this peripheral region has been grossly misunderstood and misjudged by the people from the mainland. Interestingly, the literature from this region is attempting to become an instrument to depict the experiences of the people and at the same time provide a platform to the dissenting voices from the region.

The literature from Northeast, though rich and vibrant, is not truly popular and widespread amongst the literary critics and scholars of the country and abroad because the voices from the marginalised region are being deliberately suppressed by the Centre. Sneha Khaund, a literary scholar and publishing professional, vehemently opines in her article “Systematic Erasure: Why writing from North-East India doesn’t make it to the list of ‘Indian’ books” that “[t]he absence of North-Eastern voices is not one of individual choice but one of systematic exclusion”. Therefore, persistent attempts are being made by the writers of the region to voice out the trials and tribulations of the tribal people from the region. With a rich history of oral tradition among many diverse communities inhabiting the Northeast, the new writers emerging from this part of the country relies on their storytelling culture to write about their lives on the edge. It is with this view, this paper proposes to explore the peripheral voices of the Naga people protesting against the social ills administered by the Centre that have affected their harmonious living in the society. The study has analysed two novels, that are, A Terrible Matriarchy and Bitter Wormwood of Easterine Kire to understand the lives of the Naga people residing in the peripheral region of the nation.

Easterine Kire, who belongs to the Angami tribe of the Nagas from Nagaland, is Nagaland’s first novelist who writes in the English language. She is a poet, translator and a writer par excellence. She has been honoured with the Governor’s Medal for Excellence in 2011 and the Free Voice Award by Catalan PEN, Barcelona in 2013. She has also received the Hindu Literary Prize in 2015 for the novel Where the River Sleeps and Bal Sahitya Puraskar by Sahitya Akademy in 2018 for her novel Son of Thundercloud. In her works, one perceives a realistic depiction of an authentic Naga community with their trials and tribulations. Her works simultaneously reflect both the sensitive and the bold identities of the people of Nagaland. She is thus considered one of the most powerful voices coming out of Nagaland.

The two novels of Easterine Kire that has been chosen by the researcher to explore the peripheral voices of the Naga people protesting against the social ills administered by the Centre that have affected their harmonious living in the society are A Terrible Matriarchy and Bitter Wormwood.
Terrible Matriarchy (ATM) is the second novel written by Kire, published in 2007 and it majorly highlights the internal and social strife that grips Nagaland as a state in India. The novel though majorly portrays the plight of women in the Naga community, it covertly indicates how the factors of violence and securing identity in one’s own land can ruin the growth of not just the women of the society but can deter the progress of the entire tribe or community at large. Bitter Wormwood (BW) was published in 2011. The novel narrates the story of a man named Moselie (Mose) from his birth in 1937 to his death in 2007. Kire presents a parallel history of Naga nationalism and its impact on the common man through the fictional incidents narrated in the novel. The novel induces the readers to understand the life and struggles of the people who have been most often misunderstood as the barbaric headhunters. Kire proficiently illustrates both the views from the centre and the periphery through the characters of Himmat and Moselie, respectively, about the everyday realities of the Naga people living in Nagaland.

S Thianlalmuan Ngaihte, a Professor of Political Science, in his article “The Reality of North-East as an Entity” (2013) provides his view on the centre-periphery dichotomy that prevails between the mainland India and the Northeastern regions of India. He states that “It [referring to Northeast] was considered as merely a peripheral space perceived as inhabited by “poorly administered” and “unadministered tribals” with distinct ethnic and cultural markers” (13).

The marginal treatment of the people in the periphery is portrayed quite expressively by Kire in her novel Bitter Wormwood. Kire mentions in the novel how Mose’s son “Neibou was suddenly cornered by a senior who called him a pahariya, a hill dweller . . . in an unmistakably offensive manner . . .” (BW 181). The racial labelling of making the Northeastern people feel as outsiders have marginalised the tribals in their own country and it will continue to affect their relationship with the centre in the future as well if the atmosphere of doubt and mistrust is not addressed at the earliest between the people of Northeast and the mainland.

Kire also narrates in the novel about newspapers reporting the atrocities faced by the women of Northeast in the country’s capital. She writes “The targeting of girls from the Northeast had become a big problem in the city and he had read innumerable reports about these in the newspapers” (BW 182). Kire feels that this disparity in the outlook of people in the centre towards the people in the periphery is because of the differences that exist between the two sets of people. She quotes the words of Rakesh’s grandfather, “You know, the Naga hills are so different from the Indian mainland, one has this feeling that you are in a foreign country. Then there was the language barrier too” (BW 205).

The attitude of separating the identity of the tribals of Northeast India from others in mainland India is a matter of discourse for many in the academic sphere of the region. With regard to the perception of the mainland towards the people of the Northeast, an assistant professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Urmitapa Dutta in her article “The Long Way Home: The Vicissitudes of Belonging and Otherness in North East India” mentions: “For the Indian state, the tribes from the Northeast India constitute strangers who are an anomaly, standing between inside and outside, order and chaos, friend and enemy” (167). Another powerful writer and editor from Northeast India, Uddipana Goswami in her book Conflict and Reconciliation: The Politics of Ethnicity in Assam opines that the long unaddressed issues such as those of territory demarcation, economic development, power sharing and governance widened the gap between the Northeast and the centre; thereby making the Northeast feel totally alienated and exploited.

The political indifference or mismanagement by the centre, coupled by a general ignorance of the people from the rest of the country about the people of the region, has further alienated the Northeast. The people from this part of the country are also proud of their own tradition and culture like others. In addition, they too need a recognition of their rootedness to their land and culture,
which is their right as citizens of the nation. When this right is denied to them, through various political machineries supported by the centre, the normal functioning of their routine lives at most times become an experience of terror and trauma. Thus, what has been projected as representations from the region needs a relook and the periphery should be vested with opportunities to voice out their views and concerns.

The region has received major assaults by the enactment of the oppressive Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA), which empowers the Indian security forces deployed in the declared disturbed areas to operate with unrestricted powers and even kill at mere suspicion to maintain law and order. Kire mentions in A Terrible Matriarchy how the Indian army raided Vechoi’s village and killed twenty men and raped their women to teach a lesson not to speak for an independent Nagaland. It was done because Vechoi had remarked that “[w]e are not fighting an unjust war. We were independent before India became a nation. We are fighting for our freedom because it is our right” (ATM 161). Kire also reveals how women were tortured by the army men deployed to resist the counter insurgency issues of Nagaland. She mentions how the Captain of the army in the novel Bitter Wormwood sneered at the people who were angered when “[t]he missing woman had been raped and murdered and decapitated”. The army people were absolutely unsympathetic about their action as the Captain remarks, “[w]e will do that to all those who oppose us” (BW 82).

In order to protest against these violent measures employed by the army, men either become part of the conflict by willingly joining the insurgency movement like Mose from the novel Bitter Wormwood or fall prey to the conflict by drinking and ruining their lives like Vini from A Terrible Matriarchy. These instances clearly illustrate how the everyday life of men and women in Nagaland are directly affected by the violence in the region.

It becomes imperative to understand that the Centre - Periphery dichotomy is created by a class of people to secure their hegemonic status in the nation. As Edward W. Soja writes in his book Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places: “‘We’ and ‘they’ are dichotomously spatialized and enclosed in an imposed territoriality of apartheid, ghettos, barrios, reservations, colonies, fortresses, metropoles, citadels, and other trappings that emanate from the center - periphery relation” (87). He remarks that this perception of the Centre explains the relation of unequal power and politics between the Centre and the Periphery, which results in the centre’s indecisiveness in settling the problems of the region.

The tribal people of Nagaland need to realise that all people living within the geographical boundary of this sovereign nation belong to this nation and therefore they need to abide by the laws and regulations of the nation, while at the same time people from the mainland have to acknowledge the fact that these tribal people, despite their differences, are an integral part of the nation. Hence, it is important that people overcome the differences, however vast they are, and look towards building a united nation defying the power structure existing in the Centre - State dichotomy.

A close observation of Kire’s writings would bring to light how the writer has based her writings on experiences of the world the people of Nagaland have lived through and continue to live in today. With the power of literature, the author has narrated simple and ordinary individual experiences of the episodic past that history may not be able to write about. An insightful study of these literary works enables one to perceive how the writers from Northeast are voicing and expressing the minds of the common people from the marginalised region of Northeast India. Therefore, the act of writing is not just an individual quest to explore creativity but writing is said to be defiance at times and an assertion at other times. With a narrative style strongly hinged on the art of storytelling that is very rooted to the Naga culture, these simple yet profound writings are truly the stories of the people from the periphery.
Thus, it is hoped that the writings from these peripheral regions will help the readers from across the nation, as well as the globe, to understand the true identity and culture of these people. It is only through understanding and mutual acceptance, the feelings of otherness can be altered in the thoughts and actions of the people from the mainland towards the people in the periphery.

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