

Negotiating Identity under Cultural Hegemony: Indigenous Resistance in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*

Dr. Deepak Lathwal

Associate Professor (English) Shaheed Rai Singh Govt. College Sampla.

Received: 15/02/2026 | Accepted: 06/04/2026 | Published: 28/04/2026

Abstract: This paper explores how Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* reflects the dynamics of cultural hegemony as conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci, particularly in relation to the socio-political history of the Naga people. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain control not merely through political or economic coercion but through the internalization of dominant ideologies by the oppressed. Through a close reading of the novel, this paper investigates how the Indian state imposes a hegemonic national identity that marginalizes Naga voices, history, and culture. The paper further analyzes how Kire's narrative both depicts and enacts forms of resistance—individual and collective—against cultural erasure. The novel serves as a counter-hegemonic discourse, preserving oral history, indigenous identity, and the memory of political struggle. By applying Gramsci's theoretical lens, the paper aims to foreground the tensions between domination and resistance, identity and nationalism, and memory and erasure in *Bitter Wormwood*.

Keywords: Cultural Hegemony, Indigenous Identity, Resistance, Naga Struggle, Counter-Hegemony, Identity Negotiation.

Introduction

Easterine Kire is a leading literary voice from Northeast India whose work foregrounds the lived experiences, oral traditions, and political history of the Naga people. Her fiction challenges the marginalization of indigenous narratives within mainstream Indian discourse, offering a platform for cultural memory and resistance. *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) centers on the Naga freedom struggle and explores how the Indian state imposes national identity at the cost of indigenous autonomy. Through the life of Moses, the novel examines the psychological and cultural consequences of this conflict, highlighting themes of identity, silence, and survival.

This paper employs Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which explains how dominant groups maintain power not only through coercion but by securing consent via ideological institutions such as education, religion, and media. Gramsci's concepts of civil society, consent vs. coercion, and counter-hegemony provide a lens through which the suppression and resistance of Naga identity can be critically analyzed. By reading *Bitter Wormwood* through this framework, the paper argues that Kire's novel both reveals and resists the hegemonic erasure of indigenous culture, acting as a literary space for reclaiming identity and preserving suppressed histories.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, developed in his *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929–1935 while imprisoned by Mussolini's regime), presents a nuanced understanding of power that extends beyond political and economic domination. For Gramsci, the ruling class sustains its dominance not merely through coercive force but by manufacturing consent within civil society. This is achieved by establishing its own worldview as the normative or “common sense” ideology that permeates social institutions such as education, religion, and media (Gramsci 12–13). In this way, hegemony becomes a powerful, often invisible force that legitimizes the values and interests of the dominant class while naturalizing the marginalization of subordinate groups.

Gramsci defines cultural hegemony as “the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci 145). This consent is not imposed by violence or direct control but through the slow, strategic dissemination of ideologies that serve the ruling class's interests. Institutions like schools, churches, and the press operate as ideological state apparatuses, shaping belief systems and reinforcing hegemonic norms under the guise of neutrality and objectivity. The subaltern, in turn, internalizes these

*Corresponding Author

Dr. Deepak Lathwal*

E-mail: dlathwal78@gmail.com

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license



ideologies, often without realizing their oppressive function.

A central dimension of Gramsci's theory is the possibility of counter-hegemony, whereby oppressed groups construct alternative discourses that challenge the dominant narrative. This resistance is often led by organic intellectuals, individuals who emerge from within the oppressed class and articulate its collective consciousness. As Gramsci argues, every social group "creates alongside itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals" (Gramsci 5), who help develop and propagate counter-narratives rooted in the community's lived realities and cultural heritage.

Gramsci's theory has been widely applied to postcolonial and indigenous contexts, where colonization or nation-building projects impose a singular national identity that erases or subordinates local cultures. Scholars like Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have extended Gramsci's insights to interrogate the ideological control exerted by colonial powers over knowledge, language, and identity. Said's notion of "Orientalism," for example, echoes Gramsci's framework by revealing how Western cultural institutions construct the East as inferior and passive (Said 6). Similarly, Spivak's famous question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak 66) builds upon Gramsci's notion of subalternity to highlight the silencing of indigenous voices under hegemonic discourses.

In the case of Northeast India, and specifically in Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood*, Gramsci's framework proves especially useful for examining how the Indian state projects a homogenizing national ideology that marginalizes indigenous Naga identity. The novel's portrayal of silenced histories, politicized education, and suppressed memory reflects the workings of cultural hegemony, while its narrative form itself becomes an act of counter-hegemonic resistance. Thus, Gramsci's theory enables a deeper understanding of the ideological tensions between dominance and dissent that underpin both the historical context and the literary representation of the Naga people.

Building on Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony—as articulated in his *Prison Notebooks*—Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* offers a nuanced depiction of how ideological dominance operates in the context of postcolonial Northeast India. Gramsci asserts that the ruling class secures its power not only through force but through the consent of the governed, achieved via ideological institutions that normalize its worldview (Gramsci 12–13). In Kire's novel, these hegemonic mechanisms are embedded in the Indian state's nation-building project, which marginalizes the Naga community by erasing their histories, vilifying their resistance, and reshaping their values.

The imposition of a pan-Indian national identity on the Nagas is central to this cultural erasure. The Naga political struggle for self-determination is consistently portrayed in

state-controlled narratives as extremist or anti-national. As Kire writes, "In the Indian newspapers, the Naga struggle was only ever described in terms of 'terrorist activities,' 'violent extremists,' or 'insurgents'" (*Bitter Wormwood* 108). This rhetorical framing aligns with Gramsci's idea of hegemonic discourse: by labeling Naga aspirations as threats, the state constructs a "common sense" narrative that criminalizes indigenous resistance and delegitimizes their historical grievances.

Education and media serve as primary instruments of hegemony in this process. Moses, the protagonist, recalls how school textbooks rendered the Naga people invisible:

"The books never mentioned Naga history. Our stories were left out. We didn't exist in them" (Kire 73). Such omissions reflect what Gramsci terms the "passive revolution" (Gramsci 105), where dominant ideologies are imposed under the guise of modernization and progress, effectively silencing subaltern histories. The erasure of indigenous narratives from formal education not only distorts collective memory but also conditions the younger generation to accept the state's version of truth.

Kire also critiques the moral reorientation of Naga society through the influence of Christianization, which, while offering certain educational and social benefits, often served to replace indigenous cosmologies with Eurocentric moral codes. Moses's grandfather, a devout Christian, embodies a moral order rooted in forgiveness and self-restraint. Yet, Moses's internal conflict reveals the tension between this inherited moral framework and the unacknowledged trauma of colonial and postcolonial violence. "He wanted to honour his grandfather's faith, but he also could not reject the anger he felt about what had happened to his people" (Kire 114). This ideological negotiation exemplifies how hegemonic values are internalized even as they conflict with lived experience—an insight that Gramsci considers central to the functioning of hegemony.

Another key dimension of cultural erasure in *Bitter Wormwood* is the decline of oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems, displaced by formal, state-sanctioned institutions. Storytelling, once the foundation of moral and communal life, is increasingly marginalized. "Those stories taught us who we were... now all we hear are speeches and policies," Moses laments (Kire 90). Gramsci's notion of "civil society" becomes relevant here: it is within such spheres—community, religion, education—that hegemonic ideologies circulate and become entrenched (Gramsci 245). The substitution of ancestral narratives with nationalist rhetoric marks a deeper cultural disintegration.

Ultimately, Moses himself becomes the site of ideological contestation. His journey reflects the inner conflict of a generation caught between inherited cultural memory and imposed national loyalty. While he initially internalizes state narratives and adopts a conciliatory stance,

his disillusionment grows as he confronts the gap between the ideals of Indian democracy and the lived reality of systemic marginalization. His eventual withdrawal into silence symbolizes not defeat, but the emotional and cultural exhaustion wrought by decades of hegemonic pressure.

While *Bitter Wormwood* illustrates the insidious operation of cultural hegemony, it simultaneously foregrounds subtle and explicit forms of indigenous resistance. Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, emphasizes that hegemonic control is never absolute; it is continually challenged by “counter-hegemonic” forces that articulate alternative worldviews and cultural practices (Gramsci 210). In Kire’s narrative, resistance emerges not only through political activism but also through the preservation of cultural memory, the endurance of oral traditions, and the moral agency of ordinary individuals.

Moses’s personal evolution becomes a central site of counter-hegemony. Although initially shaped by the dominant narratives imposed through schooling and religious influence, Moses remains tethered to his cultural roots. His quiet but persistent engagement with his community, and his refusal to abandon his Naga identity despite systemic alienation, reflects what Gramsci would call the position of an “organic intellectual”—someone rooted in the working class or subaltern group, articulating their lived realities and challenging dominant ideologies from within (Gramsci 10). Moses’s critical awareness of history and identity distances him from state narratives, allowing him to reclaim a voice for his people.

One of the most potent forms of resistance in the novel is the act of remembering. Against the erasure promoted by state institutions, Kire presents memory as a political tool. Moses recalls: “We have been dying for decades... not just from bullets, but from forgetting who we were” (*Bitter Wormwood* 142). This act of remembrance becomes a form of defiance against cultural amnesia imposed by hegemonic powers. According to literary scholar Sanjay Krishnan, “subaltern memory often resists the teleological linearity of official historiography” (Krishnan 89). Kire’s commitment to preserving Naga oral history within her fiction thus constitutes a literary counter-hegemony, challenging homogenized national narratives.

The character of Neingulie also embodies resistance through cultural preservation. His commitment to storytelling and his insistence on passing on Naga traditions to younger generations highlight the importance of everyday acts of cultural continuity. He tells Moses, “You must remember the stories... they are our roots, and if you forget them, you forget yourself” (Kire 68). In this way, storytelling serves not only as a mnemonic device but as a resistance to cultural domination—echoing Gramsci’s belief in the power of civil society as a space for ideological contestation (Gramsci 245).

Furthermore, the novel critiques the futility of militant resistance while upholding the dignity of non-violent perseverance. While Kire does not romanticize violence, she humanizes those who participated in armed struggle, portraying them as products of historical betrayal rather than innate aggression. The tragic character of Vilie, who becomes entangled in the militant movement, is a testament to the structural pressures that drive individuals into resistance. His eventual disillusionment and death are not signs of failure but symbols of unresolved trauma and the high cost of resistance under hegemonic domination. Kire’s sympathetic portrayal insists on acknowledging the historical conditions that lead to revolt, thereby refusing the state’s criminalization of dissent.

Importantly, the persistence of local moral frameworks also serves as a form of resistance. While Christian morality is portrayed as both a colonizing and ethical force, indigenous values of community, respect for elders, and relationship with the land endure throughout the novel. These cultural codes, though often suppressed, continue to inform characters’ decisions and provide a moral compass independent of state or church authority.

In sum, Kire’s *Bitter Wormwood* does not merely depict a community crushed by hegemonic power; it portrays a people actively negotiating, resisting, and redefining their identity. The novel enacts Gramsci’s concept of counter-hegemony by creating space for marginalized voices and upholding indigenous epistemologies. Through memory, storytelling, cultural practices, and personal integrity, the characters articulate resistance in ways that complicate the binary of submission and rebellion, making Kire’s fiction a vital site of indigenous political and cultural assertion.

In *Bitter Wormwood*, Easterine Kire not only chronicles the cultural erasure and violence inflicted upon the Naga people but also foregrounds a resilient, continuous tradition of resistance. Drawing on Gramsci’s notion of counter-hegemony—the process by which subaltern groups challenge the dominant ideology through cultural and intellectual opposition—the novel demonstrates how indigenous communities negotiate identity, preserve cultural memory, and assert agency through both individual and collective acts of defiance (Gramsci 210).

At the heart of this resistance stands Moses, a deeply introspective character who wrestles with conflicting identities. His life is a site of ideological negotiation between the imposed national identity and his indigenous consciousness. Though shaped by state institutions and Christian morality, Moses consistently resists complete assimilation. He reflects, “I never felt part of their world, even when I lived among them. I was always aware of what I carried inside—memories, voices, pain” (Kire 116). Moses becomes what Gramsci would term an “organic intellectual”—a member of a marginalized group who

articulates its experiences and resists dominant discourses from within (Gramsci 10). His life story resists simplification, embodying the hybrid, conflicted self that survives in the shadows of power.

Beyond Moses, other characters in the novel embody resistance in quieter but equally powerful ways. Neingulie, for instance, commits himself to cultural preservation through oral storytelling and memory work. His effort to remind Moses of the importance of remembering—"If we forget our stories, we forget who we are" (Kire 68)—is a direct challenge to the hegemonic erasure of indigenous history. Such acts of grassroots cultural continuity parallel what Gramsci calls the "war of position," a slow, strategic struggle within civil society to undermine dominant ideologies (Gramsci 238). Rather than direct confrontation, these characters sustain cultural identity through everyday resistance and communal resilience.

Language and storytelling emerge as key counter-hegemonic tools in Kire's narrative. As literary scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues, language is "a carrier of culture" and a site of resistance when reclaimed by oppressed peoples (Ngugi 16). By embedding Naga oral traditions, local idioms, and folk memory into the narrative fabric, Kire challenges dominant historiographies and reclaims narrative agency for the Naga people. Her novel becomes a political act in itself—a written form of what Walter D. Mignolo terms "epistemic disobedience," a refusal to abide by the logic of dominant (in this case, state-sanctioned) knowledge systems (Mignolo 45).

This emphasis on narrative as resistance reinforces the idea that literature itself can serve as counter-hegemonic discourse. By centering indigenous voices, portraying political trauma from the inside, and recovering marginalized histories, *Bitter Wormwood* positions itself as a literary intervention in hegemonic national narratives. As the narrator states, "This is not the story of warlords and politicians, but of those who lived through it, quietly bearing the weight of history" (Kire 143). This shift in perspective reflects a Gramscian understanding of culture as a battlefield of meaning, where power is contested not only in institutions but also in storytelling and memory.

Easterine Kire's *Bitter Wormwood* exposes the mechanisms of cultural hegemony while simultaneously

resisting them through narrative and representation. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory, this paper has shown how hegemonic power operates through institutions like education, religion, and media to suppress indigenous identity and reshape moral consciousness. Yet, Kire's characters, particularly Moses and Neingulie, embody quiet but powerful forms of resistance—preserving cultural memory and negotiating identity amidst dominant ideologies.

The novel acts as a counter-hegemonic text, reclaiming indigenous voices and challenging official histories. By foregrounding the lived experiences of the Naga people, Kire contributes to the decolonization of knowledge and asserts the enduring relevance of storytelling as a tool of resistance. Gramsci's theory thus remains a valuable framework for understanding contemporary indigenous struggles, and *Bitter Wormwood* stands as a literary testament to cultural resilience and the power of narrative in the face of erasure.

Works Cited

1. Gramsci, A. (1971). Selections from the prison notebooks.
2. Kire, E. (2012). *Bitter wormwood*. Zubaan.
3. Krishnan, S. (2007). *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia*. Columbia University Press.
4. Mignolo, W. D. (2020). *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*. Duke University Press.
5. Bhole, H. S. (1987). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London: James Currey; Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986. 114 pp. \$10.00. Paper. *African Studies Review*, 30(2), 102-103.
6. Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
7. Chakravorty Spivak, G. (1988). Can the subaltern speak?. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 271-313.