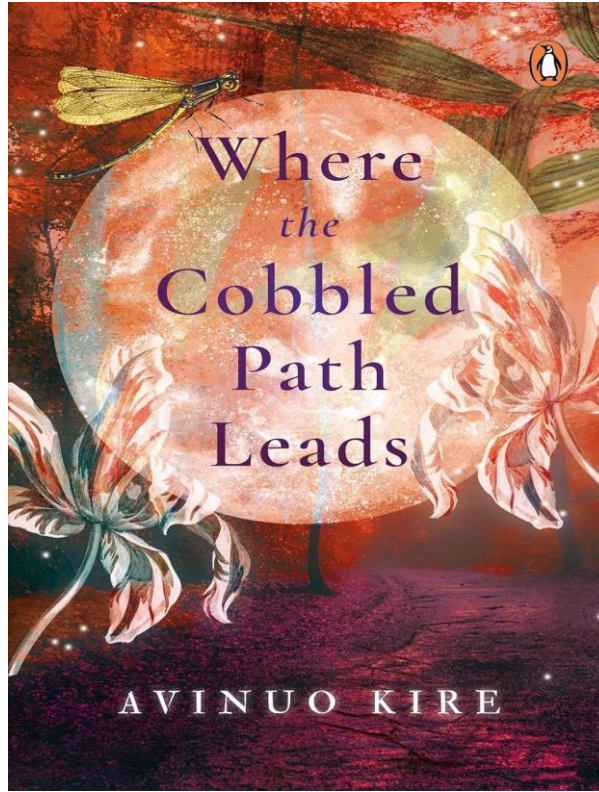


Avinuo Kire. 2022. *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*. Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 1-175 pp. ISBN: 978-06-70096-79-4



Writings from Northeast India have been cartographically and ideologically subjected to both deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation from the mainland Indian tradition. They have generated a corpus that, in terms of themes, have ample resonance across the eight states. The emphasis on highlighting certain concerns that are endemic to the entire region, and have come to be associated with a reductive “Northeast paradigm,” has made it difficult for writers to explore themes and issues beyond the familiar tropes. These include, identity, ethnicity, insurgency, militarisation, periphery, indigeneity, neo-colonialism, linguistic parochialism, and similar issues. Whether one turns to fiction, poetry, drama, or non-fiction, these tropes most often get foregrounded, or intersected in literary works emerging from this region. The spatial imaginary is characterised by oxymorons like “durable disorder,” or a sweeping phrase like “troubled periphery.” That is what readers expect when they read any work coming from the region, and especially, Nagaland, from which writers like Temsula Ao and

Easterine Kire have contributed substantively to generating the Northeast paradigm.

Therefore, readers will be in for a surprise when they read Avinuo Kire's new novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*. It is an exorcism of sorts, or to be more specific, a heady detox served to wash away the detritus of traumatising colonial and post-colonial narratives centred on militarisation and identity assertion across the entire region. Avinuo Kire's novel effortlessly shuttles back and forth between the real world and the world of spirits. The story seems to be derived from the rich Naga oral tradition. However, Kire provides it with a realistic framework through the coming-of-age narrative revolving around the central character Vime, who remembers her mother on the latter's death anniversary. The void created by the untimely passing of the mother affects the small household comprising of Vime, her father, and elder sister Neinuo. Vime was particularly attached to her mother, and the memory of her mother's hearty, throaty laugh made her remember her wistfully. This realistic framework is developed further to introduce the character of Khrielie, the would-be step-mother of Vime and Neinuo. The fascinating thing to note here is how the universal evil stepmother trope is inverted. The evil step-mother archetype is resonant in folktales across the world. In Assamese writer Lakshminath Bezbaroa's folktale collection *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, there are several tales associated with macabre, chilling, grotesque acts committed by evil stepmothers. These classic tales, despite being meant for children, have the possibility of causing trauma, considering the graphic violence depicted in them, as for instance, the story "Tejimola." I have not been able to muster the courage to revisit these tales. So, it is remarkably poignant to come across the character Khrielie, who not only dotes on Vime, but is the person who searches for her frantically, when Vime enters into the spirit world in quest of her mother. The inversion of a familiar patriarchal trope invests the narrative with an affective intensity, which is one of the high moments of the novel. It debunks the universal stereotype of the maleficent step-mother trope, in that way, righting the wrongs of a purportedly patriarchal tradition.

However, it is Avinuo Kire's imagining of the "irreal," fabular world beyond where the cobbled path leads that marks the novel's departure from the staple Northeast paradigm. This portal leads to the reclamation of an ancient repository that is often repressed on theologico-ideological grounds. Kire, in an interview with Prajwal Parajuly at the Jaipur Literary Festival, 2022, indicated that Naga communities practiced a form of nativised Christianity that allowed them to exist in a *pensam* (in-betweenness), in which Christian exegesis and Naga indigenous belief systems arrived at an ambivalent convergence. This

convergence happens despite certain ideological apparatuses advocating strict adherences to forms of authorised institutionalised practices. Kire's novel seems to resonate with Homi K Bhabha's notion "sly civility," which implies the construction of a type of colonial subjectivity that conforms to authority through subtle, covert acts of resistance. The conception of the spirit world that is redolent with animistic principles and deities – both malevolent and benevolent – testifies to the comfortable dalliance of certain Christianised Naga communities with the indigenous animistic heritage, in which the spirit world has as much of value as the phenomenal world. In the novel, as Vime makes an incursion into the spirit world with the aid of Tei (a maleficent spirit), she witnesses all kinds of spirits that form the constellation of the Naga demonological system. The way in which Kire depicts this realm seems to resonate with the surfeit of imagery and fantasy associated with a Studio Ghibli production. It is the depiction of this phantasmic world with an undertone of the uncanny, surreal, and bizarre, yet suffused with an aching longing for "Apfo" (mother, in spirit form), that, for me, is the novel's tour-de-force. The dazzling imagery, part of the often-repressed cultural memory, but lying dormant in a *spiritus mundi*, comes unleashing through Kire's profound vision. It transforms the simple fable of an orphan pining for her mother and seeking her in a nether-worldly realm into a work, in which the rich indigenous oral tradition of the Naga community gets foregrounded with full, fictional flourish. The subtle metafictional touch towards the end of the novel seems to offer a commentary on the legitimacy of intersecting fact with fiction. The narrator notes:

In the years to come, Vime's adventure would not always hold under humankind's amusing propensity to insist on making sense of things that are beyond frail human understanding.... And that as long as she, Vime, believed in her truth, well, there was all there was to it really, she decided. (172)

This phenomenological ambivalence makes the readers aware of the novel being magical realist in its narrative logic; however, the magical component is part and parcel of the indigenous belief system that is deeply ingrained within the collective unconscious of the Naga community, despite their proselytisation into a markedly different religious apparatus that enforces them to reject the claims of their oral tradition steeped in animistic beliefs. Kire's novel, in that sense, is significant, as it embodies the phenomenological perception of a type of colonial subjectivity that were situated within a liminal psychological space. This liminality is evident everywhere in Kire's novel.

The novel, by skirting away from the political imperative, does not intend to reject the Northeast paradigm. There are indications interspersed throughout

the text that unobtrusively hint at the locus of the narrative being a militarised zone. Therefore, Kire's novel cannot be brushed off as a narrative that displaces the Northeast paradigm entirely through a willful act of political amnesia. Rather, it is a story that unleashes the cultural memory of Naga communities – the fantastic, phantasmagoric, animistic belief system transmitted intergenerationally through orality – that were subject to collective-repression due to the privileging of Western modernity. Kire's novel, by that logic, is an act of exorcism, in which there is an attempt to look beyond the repressive structure of rationality by remembering and relieving indigenous wisdom, steeped in the eternal values of nature, rather than culture. This mnemonical reclamation of a pre-lapsarian condition is what Avinuo Kire's novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* is successful in achieving effortlessly.

Writings from India's Northeast has reached a tipping-point in the way it keeps on harping on familiar tropes. It is, in a sense, stuck in a proverbial rut. If it has to evolve and excite the imagination of the 21st century millennial demographic, the form and content need to be re-envisioned. This is, of course, not by denying the traumatising past of the troubled periphery, or by glossing over issues of identity, ethnicity, insurgency, and environmental crisis. Writers will continue to probe into these roiling issues, and keep on memorialising them. It is essential to do so, as the formation and consolidation of spaces, identities, and communities are inextricably bound to their shared burdens of history and memory. However, it is also necessary that a living culture and tradition keeps looking back into its indigenous heritage and repositories, mostly present in tenuous, precarious forms – orality, papyrus, and parchments – and keeps preserving them in didots, calibris, or garamonds – in fiction, non-fiction, or any means available. It is heartening to note that writers like Avinuo Kire are doing just that, and ensuring that the future generations get to know about the sense and semblance of their remarkably storied past that needs to be preserved and propagated despite the slings and arrows of modernity's monolithic logic seizing everything in its wake.

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