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Insurgency-Induced Trauma: A Study of Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold*

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Abstract: This paper examines insurgency-induced trauma in Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold* (2011), situating the novella within the socio-political history of Nagaland. Set against the backdrop of prolonged conflict between Naga nationalist groups and the Indian state, the narrative portrays the emotional, physical, and economic disturbances experienced by ordinary civilians in Kohima. Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an overwhelming event that returns through repetition and Dominick LaCapra's notions of "acting out" and "working through," the study analyses how violence, extortion, factional killings, and political instability disrupt individual and collective life. Through the character of Nimenuo (Nime), Kire represents the long-lasting psychological scars produced by insurgency—manifested in fear, silence, anxiety, dreams, and fractured relationships. The novella further highlights the gendered dimensions of trauma, as women endure silent suffering while negotiating familial responsibilities amidst uncertainty. By documenting the lived experiences of common people, *Life on Hold* emerges as an important literary testimony of collective memory and cultural crisis. The paper argues that Kire's work not only records historical trauma but also reflects on resilience, survival, and the persistent longing for peace in a conflict-ridden society.

Keywords: Insurgency, Trauma, Collective Memory, Nagaland, Easterine Kire, Political Violence,

"Each family in Nagaland has a story to tell: of personal loss, of bereavement, of physical and emotional trauma"

Preeti Gill, "Women in the Time of Conflict: the case of Nagaland", p.217

Northeast India and its literary representation is an emerging field of study. The region comprising eight states is known for various reasons. It is often looked at as a conflict-ridden zone as various groups often involved in fightings and killings for protecting their land, identity and culture. It is also known for its environmental richness, cultural diversity and indigenous knowledge system. The study of indigenous practices provides knowledge of unique sustainable methods, value system and worldviews. Each state has numerous tribes and their ways of life are unique.

Easterine Kire is an eminent writer from Nagaland. Her writings depict, from the indigenous perspective, the lived experience of the people of Nagaland, a Northeastern state inhabited by sixteen Naga tribes with different unique historical and cultural backgrounds. History of Nagaland sometimes goes wide as the history of conflicts. Since independence, people of the state have seen frequent gunfights between Indian army and Naga army. In the later period, the Naga national workers got involved in factional fights, and with all these the ordinary people suffered the violent impact of peacelessness and loss of lives and properties. The demand for independent Nagaland gave rise to the birth of insurgent groups in the 1950s under the leadership

of Phizo. As a result of this, ordinary men, women and children have gone through individual and collective traumatic experiences which have never been recorded in literature as they did not have the tradition of written culture. Writing from their own perspective is a recent phenomenon in Nagaland. Easterine Kire, in her novella *Life on Hold*, has portrayed the story of a family and their relatives passing through the impacts of insurgency in and around Kohima. This paper intends to explore the emotional, physical and economical disturbances depicted in the novel drawing upon the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra.

This paper will analyse qualitatively Easterine Kire's *Life on Hold* (2011) using the basic concepts of trauma given by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. According to Michelle Balaev, trauma "refers to a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 150). The violent killings and threatening of insurgent groups created disturbances in the emotional states of the ordinary people in Kohima. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). Dominick LaCapra in his book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), propounds two aspects of trauma 'acting out' and 'working through'. 'Acting out' refers to the reliving of the past event in terms of repetition, dreams, fears, violence, anxieties etc. and 'working through' trauma refers to the understanding and healing of traumatic events through memory, storytelling, prayers etc. (LaCapra 21-22). Close textual analysis of the novella reveals recurrent anxiety and fear as traumatic expressions in the minds of the characters.

Easterine Kire's novel *Life on Hold* (2011) brings out the sufferings and the flow of life at the time of insurgency in Nagaland. The political conflict shadowed the sunshine of the common people's lives. Nime's father Pusalie was a businessman who could not go smoothly with his business works due to frequent disturbances by the insurgents in the name of Naga National workers. They would extort money from the businessmen. "The various underground parties liked to call themselves National workers" (Kire 11). If any shopkeeper refused to pay taxes in terms of a definite share, he would be killed in daylight. It was a frightening atmosphere for businessmen. They had to borrow money from the moneylenders and when it became impossible to pay back the borrowed money they had to give up with the property. Murkut Ramunny has noted the pattern of the working of underground, "Forcible recruitment and collection of taxes, kidnapping and killing of those who opposed the movement, destroying villages that did not succumb to their propaganda, were the modus-operandi of the underground" (Ramunny 713). This pattern established by Phizo during 1950s and 60s continued and followed by future factions of the underground workers.

The novella opens with Nimenuo, aged seven, and her friends Roko and Setuo, aged seven and a half, enjoying their friendly games while attending schools in Kohima during the 1980s. Their innocent school days were enriched with traditional learning camps in the hills. Nime was in seventh grade when she went to a nature camp arranged by the school. Learning some basic life skills and being with nature was a good thing for the learners and it is the way of traditional knowledge acquisition. The children got to listen to birds' song and touch the water of river. They learnt to build temporary shelters using leaves of bananas. They learnt to identify the various types of edible herbs. They became familiar with animal noises. Collecting wood for cooking, fetching water, washing hands in streams and eating rice together are some enjoyable learning activities for them (Kire 16). But very soon they got entangled in the vicious, violent atmosphere, as Nime and her brother Zeu, one fine morning walking to school, watched a dead body with a bloody shirt. In school, Nime and her friends began talking about the activities of factional groups and Naga freedom struggle. Kire writes, "The factional groups as they were called, insisted they were fighting the Indian army in their struggle for Naga independence. But they were quickly establishing a reign of fear through the brutal killings of fellow Nagas who opposed them" (Kire 20). The innocent girlhood of Nime turned traumatic with fears and anxieties throughout her life navigating through love, separation, marriage, giving birth to children and even further in life. The story ends when Nime was 33 years old and already faced traumatic experiences of life.

Naga freedom fighters often killed people who did not support them. In the 1980s the conflicts among the factions of the Naga freedom fighters were going high. Even young girls and boys of below 20 years joined the Naga army. Nime and Zeu after watching the killed person with blood smeared on the body became frightened over this sight and they curiously wanted to know the factional politics of the Naga freedom fighters from their elders. Nime's mother provided a mysterious rationale to her "Because we are seeing something we have never seen before. These men are different. They are ruthless kill people readily" (19). Parents tried to keep away their children from the destructive influences of warring groups. Therefore, they, if they could afford it, would send their boys and girls to some college in Shillong or any other distant places. In the conversation between Nime and Roko it becomes clear:

“Not yet,” said Roko, “my parents want me to leave Kohima.”

“I can understand,” she answered. They were both referring to the increasing tension from the extortions and killings.

“I don’t want to go away,” he said.

“Have you tried telling them that?” she asked.

“No, they wouldn’t care.”

“I am sure they would. You should tell them how you feel.”

“Nime, I don’t want to study anymore. I have other plans. I’m going to work for my uncle Pelekho-u. Don’t tell anyone though.” (25)

Roko’s parents sent him to Shillong to join St Edmund’s college but he became inclined to join the Naga freedom fighters. His uncle was a Major in the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (25). The terrible atmosphere had a negative influence on the young boys and girls since childhood. Kire’s narrative, through these characters, bring out the reality of Nagaland in a critical time. Young minds suffered due to hopelessness, violence, killings and lack of job opportunities. The discontent reverberated in the society as Roko felt: “There are no jobs for people like me, it all goes to the privileged classes” (28). Nike and Setuo tried to dissuade him from joining the violent group intended for fighting against Indian army, but it went in vain. These are the real stories. Anyone joined in the group could not desert easily as he or she would be shot by others.

Roko joined Naga National workers and it was disheartening to his father and also to Nime who sheltered a soft niche in her heart for him. It is a reality that points to the sufferings and anxieties of a young man’s relatives and friends and family members due to the existence of Naga Nationalistic entities continuously fighting against so many odds. Roko’s father disowned his son as soon as he got the news of his joining the NSCN. Kire writes, “His father was so hurt when he discovered that Roko had left to join the NSCN, as everyone referred to the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. He shouted, “I have no son now, my son is dead!”” (34). Violent factional fights resulting in killings and counter killings gave birth to an ambience that triggered embitterment, disappointment, frustration among the young generation of boys and girls. The novel draws upon the facts of original organisation Naga National Council, and then of National Socialist Council of Nagaland and after that the break of it and formation of two further groups NSCN(K) led by Khaplang and NSCN(IM) led by Isak and Muivah. The story of Roko and his friends implicitly brings about reasons for the increase of underground activities in Nagaland. The state government worked through corrupted means and it is clear from the discussion between Nime and Zeu who told that Shekato and Neituo got jobs by giving bribes to the minister where there was total 148 other candidates who were left out of the competition. This resentment led to the more joining in underground forces.

Love becomes the victim of political turmoil. Human feelings, specially of young boys and girls, are hurt by the situations. Roko’s joining in the Naga army brought the repressed feelings of Nime out and she expressed her utmost desire to get him and live with peace somewhere distant from Kohima. But, when for the first time Roko met her after his joining in the army he clearly expressed the loss of right to love as soon as he joined the army. He said, “I have nothing to offer you, Nime, not even my love. I have no right to love you, yet I do” (39). Love and marriage become outside the purview of advantage in the life of a soldier in a Naga army. Life becomes uncertain while fighting for the greater national cause. Roko could not respond to Nime’s calls for a beautiful life. Roko’s understanding of the political situation aligns with the dominant ideological political presence of Nagaland at that time. His choice, may be a call of time, had inevitably driven away the feminine presence in terms of familial bonding and he declared, “...there is no room for a woman in my life, there never will be, that’s the choice I have had to make” (41). Nime being less mature in understanding the greater politics gave vent to the rejection of Roko by saying angrily “The stupid national movement, is more important to him than me” (42).

Nime’s father Pusalie suffered a lot due to some adverse situations brought by the political turmoil. His business was not going well and with this the added anxiety of the violent activities of the underground army. He became mad as a result of fears and tensions felt within of the bad situation. The event that took place at Parking Tea Hotel created an alarming anxiety among the people. Four underground soldiers came and shot a few people including Pusalie and Delie dead. Kire narrates the killings, “When it was all over, the police came to collect the dead. Six bodies in all. Delie had been shot eleven times...Pusalie had been hit by two bullets. Throughout the shooting, he had been lying on the floor. One through his stomach and the other in his temple” (69). Nime and other female family members including her mother were deeply hurt by the violent events. Kire writes, “Shocked by the violence of Father’s death and the strain of his illness, she had lost a lot of weight” (70). Cathy Caruth opines that trauma is an overwhelming experience and Nime’s experience of her father’s brutal killing is such a one. It returns to her in the form of fear, silence and anxiety. The nature of sudden shooting disrupts her sense of safety. The trauma is about the unpredictability of violence. The community realises that death can occur at any place and time. Thus, trauma reshapes their

understanding of ordinary space. Nime's brother, Zeu became furious for retaliation: "For some days, he kept saying the killers should be eliminated as well" (70). The repressed anger turns into the form of what LaCapra says 'acting out' of trauma which results in cycles of violence. It is the psychological sufferings of the female members that intensified more and more as the male members faced violent killings outside the home. The administration and the government could not protect the ordinary people and they did their part providing some compensations and arranging the clearing of dead bodies. Nime's mother-in-law Lhounuo recounted the same story of violence in the 1950s. She could understand Nime's feelings and anxieties as her own father "had been shot by the Indian army back in the fifties" (72). They both shared the toughness of life from an early stage of life. Nime's husband Abeiu's insensitivity and anger is also linked to the violent activities of the national workers. The situation was so worst that both the businessmen and the government employees were very much annoyed with the demand letter of taxes from the national workers and their organization. If it was not paid, they had to face violent consequences. Abeiu gave vent to his anger, "Stupid no-goods! Some people work hard all their lives only to have it taken away by some mercenaries. They call themselves national workers but they are only doing it for the money. If they were really fighting for Naga independence, why are they terrorising law-abiding people like us?" (84). It became a universal anxiety for the ordinary people to satisfy the demands of the national workers, and it resulted often conflicts and psychological sufferings impacting the family life of an individual. The political crisis became the personal uncertainties and disturbances.

Generation after generation got involved in the activities of national workers. The story tells how even Nime's son at an early stage caught the smell of the activities of IM faction. Her son, Zotuo, one day, after returning from school, suddenly asked his mother to buy him a gun so that he could join the IM faction of Naga national workers. It was percolated among the school children that joining and acting as a worker in the group is somewhat heroic. Nime was deeply shocked at this: "To think that even children were picking up a gun-culture from such a young age. It felt like their innocence was being robbed from them. Would her son someday grow up and tell her that he was going to become a national worker?" (95). This reminds her of persuading Roko not to join the organization of Naga national workers in her prewedding years. The experience had cost too much for her life. She had lost her father, childhood beloved and now she was going to lose her own son in the gravitation of the activities of Naga national workers. Nime was fearful that her husband was openly resentful of them. He should not shout against them; otherwise, they might target him, as nobody dared to protest their violent, unlawful deeds.

Nime's sufferings made her reflective at the end of the story. Like everyone, she also desired peace in the land. Nobody could predict when that would come. Nagaland is still not agreed to join the Indian government. Since independence, the fight between Indian army and Naga army is on except a few peace agreements, which do not guarantee peace. People of the state think themselves colonised by the Indian government. Kire narrates the thought of Nime:

If only peace would return to their land, she thought, but that seemed too improbable. Just two days ago, in an encounter between the factions, five young men had been killed. It didn't seem as though peace would descend in the near future. Let my children have good lives then, she prayed, at least let them never go through what I have experienced. (97)

Frequent encounters between the factions of Naga national workers and the killings of young men became the common fear of the ordinary people. With this atmosphere how can a society expect good relations, family peace, learning, good upbringing of children and day to day economic and cultural activities? The crisis is the answer of the question. The bigger issue is the protection of identity of the Nagas through the preservation of the unique cultural practices and values of the various tribes in Nagaland. Nime and other women characters show the signs of 'working through' the trauma in terms of expecting peace and normalcy in near future, but it seems a distant thing in reality.

Dream of Nime towards the end of the story reflects how the violent killing seen fourteen years ago returns as a traumatic experience. Cathy Caruth opines that trauma reappears in the form of dream. Nime had a memory of watching a bloody dead body in her schooldays and that was a traumatic experience. In course of the novel, she had faced several other killings and threats. All these certainly made up her anxious mind. These experiences later came back as imagination, dreams, and prayers for the unpredictable violent killings. Kire writes about Nime's dream:

With a small shock she realised it was the same dream she had had 14 years ago of finding Roko's lifeless body in the wood. She gasped at the memory. Did that mean something had happened to him? Why was she dreaming the same dream again after all these years? Where was he now? Oh Lord, keep him from danger, she prayed helplessly. Unable to sleep again, she lay in bed, praying for him at intervals and imagining the worst. (98)

Life on Hold is a portrayal of a conflicting period in the history of Nagaland. The novella captures the crucial aspects of the history of Nagaland, depicting the political, personal and communal crisis of the people of Kohima. It analyses the plausible reasons of the crisis. Through Nime's character, the novella presents the sufferings, fears, anxieties and the collective trauma of a community. Violence could cause emotional and physical harm to the individuals but Nime has shown the endurance and the power of survival amidst constant uncertainties and unpredictabilities of life. While the male characters are trapped more intensely in the imbroglio of corruption, violence, killings, losses, expressing emotions overtly by participating in actions, the women characters such as Nime, her mother, mother-in-law suffer silently praying for the peace and safety of the male counterparts of the family. The novella is an important literary document of the political crisis of Nagaland in the latter half of the twentieth century. The ideology of the Naga nationalist movement gradually entered everyday life in Naga society. Over time, members of the movement began to be viewed, especially by children and young people, as figures of courage and sacrifice. Their political demands were framed as part of a larger struggle for justice and self-determination. Yet, alongside this rhetoric of resistance, practices such as extortion and violence became increasingly common. The failure of governance, widespread corruption, and the lack of employment opportunities for the youth created a climate in which such movements could gain support and sympathy. At the same time, the movement was marked by internal tensions. Factional divisions and ideological disagreements weakened its unity and, in many ways, complicated its original vision. Ordinary civilians gradually found themselves caught between state authority and insurgent groups. The forcible collection of money and property, along with the constant threat of violence, led many to feel disillusioned. The very community in whose name the struggle was carried out began to experience anxiety and uncertainty.

Fundamentally, the insurgency was driven by a deep concern for the preservation of Naga identity. There was a persistent fear that political integration into the Indian nation-state would erode long-held communal traditions, cultural practices, and collective autonomy. On the other hand, the Indian government's unwillingness to concede sovereignty prolonged the conflict. In the absence of meaningful dialogue and resolution, violence became a recurring reality of daily life. This prolonged condition of instability did not merely affect political structures; it left enduring psychological and emotional scars on the people, embedding trauma within the collective memory of the region.

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