

Echoes of War and Violence: Psychological and Emotional Toll in Easternine Kire's Novels *Life on Hold* and *A Respectable Woman*

B. Deepa

Research Scholar

Sri Padmavati Mahila Vishwavidyalayam

Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

deepaprudvi84@gmail.com

Professor M. Neeraja

Department of English

Sri Padmavati Mahila Vishwavidyalayam

Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the psychological impact, emotional suffering, and mental anguish experienced by individuals and communities in the select novels of Easternine Kire. The paper also aims to explore how wars and prolonged violence leave lasting psychological scars and emotional imprints upon the collective memory of ordinary people. In *Life on Hold*, Kire foregrounds the emotional pain and psychological burden endured during the Naga War of freedom and the years of insurgency. Similarly, *A Respectable Woman* highlights the lingering effects of war and violence on ordinary people, and communal memory. The study further investigates how the people of Nagaland adapt to and endure the devastating consequences of war while striving to preserve their cultural identity and humanity amidst conflict. The paper throws light on the enduring effects of war, violence in Northeast India, particularly in Nagaland.

Keywords: Northeast India, Psychological Trauma, Toll of War, Collective Memory, Conflict, Nagaland.

Easterine Kire, one of the most prolific and prominent literary voices from Northeast India, is a novelist, poet, and translator. She is widely recognized as Nagaland's first novelist writing in the English language. Kire has received several prestigious honours, including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Bal Sahitya Puraskar for her significant contribution to Indian literature. As a writer born and raised in Nagaland, Easterine Kire vividly reflects the lived realities of the Naga people and the enduring impact of the World War-II, Naga war of independence, and insurgency on their social and emotional lives. Kire personally witnessed and endured the harsh realities of prolonged conflict. In the novels *Life on Hold* and *A Respectable Woman*, Easterine Kire delineates how the wars and violence affect the psychic fabric of the Naga community.

Life on Hold(2011) and *A Respectable Woman*(2019) portray the profound psychological and emotional consequences of war and prolonged conflict in the region deeply marked by insurgency and political unrest in Nagaland, often referred 'the cradle of insurgency '. War affects not only combatants but also non-combatants whose lives are disrupted by violence, displacement, fear, and uncertainty.

In *Life on Hold*, the innocent childhood of Nime and Roko gets invaded by the ideology of Naga nationalism through stories of resistance, sacrifice, and collective suffering. The stories of nationalism shape Roko's consciousness from an early age and cultivate a deep sense of duty toward the nationalist movement. Fascinated by the vision of an independent Naga nation, Roko eventually joins the movement soon after completing his schooling. Easterine Kire presents this decision not as an act of youthful adventure, but as a tragic commitment, metaphorically describing writing his own death warrant. The phrase highlights the fatal consequences associated with the Naga struggle against the Indian state. Although

Nime repeatedly pleads with him not to leave her, and live with her, Roko sacrifices his love and domestic stability for what he perceives as the greater good of the nation. When Nime asks him to go to other safe place and live together, Roko answers,

"All my life, I'll be looking over my shoulder for the Assassin. What kind of a life is that for us? Do you want to live the rest of your life as my widow?...So long as I am a soldier, I am protected. The day I quit, I won't have a chance anymore... Okay, let me put it this way, there is no room for woman in my life, there never will be, that's the choice I have had to make."

(Life on Hold, p.p. 39-41)

His choice illustrates how nationalist movements often demand the suppression of individual emotions in favour of nationalism and collective aspirations. So, here Kire exposes the emotional and psychological costs of nationalism, particularly upon ordinary lives. Nime's response embodies the silent suffering experienced by those left behind in times of violence and the Naga conflict. Her sadness, anger, and fear of an uncertain future reveal the emotional burden of war. Through Nime's grief, Kire foregrounds violence behind nationalism and its devastating impact on human relationships. Thus, the novel demonstrates that the struggle for nationhood is deeply personal, affecting love, family, and emotional security. As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities*, nations are "imagined communities" built upon shared beliefs and sacrifices, however, Kire complicates this idea by revealing the painful human consequences that accompany such imagined political dreams.

"The nation is an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign...It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."

(Anderson Benedict, 1983).

Although Nime aspires to attain independence through employment and self-reliance, her personal ambitions are suppressed by the socio-economic pressures imposed by her family. Nime's father, Pusalie, becomes an unsuccessful businessman and falls into enormous debt because of continuous extortions. To rescue her family from financial ruin, Nime sacrifices her personal freedom by marrying a wealthy man, while her brother Zeu remains unmarried in order to repay the debts left behind by their father suffering from paranoia, a psychological illness produced by prolonged conflict. The younger generation is compelled to surrender their emotional lives and personal choices for the survival of their families.

In *Life on Hold*, war and violence emerge not merely as physical reality but as deeply internalized psychological condition that shape the emotional lives of individuals and communities. The prolonged Indo-Naga conflict creates an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and emotional fragmentation where routine life becomes impossible. Characters experience constant anxiety, insecurity, and paranoia as violence infiltrates domestic spaces, and intimate relationships.

The psychological toll of violence is further portrayed through the breakdown of familial and emotional stability. Nime's life gets shaped by loss, helplessness, and economic coercion. Her forced marriage for financial survival demonstrates how war extends beyond the battlefield. Violence produces emotional alienation, particularly among women, who bear the burden of preserving families amid social collapse. Nime's marriage, which initially appears to be a means of rescuing her family from economic collapse, gradually turns into another site of oppression and psychological violence. Her husband abuses her, and restricts her from visiting her homeland and parents, and constantly suspects her of infidelity by branding her as Roko's mistress. His insults further intensify when he mockingly calls her as "his father's daughter," referring to her father's mental illness. Nime becomes trapped between political violence outside and emotional violence inside the household. Her

husband's behavior reflects the stigmatization of trauma and mental illness in society, where the suffering caused by war and instability is transformed into shame and humiliation. Thus, the novel portrays how women in conflict-ridden postcolonial societies endure multiple layers of oppression be it economic, emotional, patriarchal, and psychological, while being denied dignity, freedom, and emotional security.

The conflict creates what postcolonial theorists identify as a "psychic wound," where individuals struggle to maintain emotional coherence amid war and violence. Fear becomes normalized, relationships become fragile, and survival replaces emotional fulfillment.

Nime, on the other hand, represents the emotional and psychological suffering caused by conflict. Her life remains "on hold" as she is forced to live with uncertainty, loss, and emotional burden after Roko's departure. The violence around her destroys the possibility of a normal future and compels her into unwanted compromises, including marrying for financial security due to her family's economic collapse. Through Nime, the novel reveals how war affects women differently, burdening them with emotional endurance, social responsibility, and silent suffering.

Nime's brother, Zeu's character further illustrates the disillusionment of youth trapped in a militarized society. Growing up amidst violence normalizes fear and instability, leaving young people psychologically fragmented and uncertain about their future. The novel thus demonstrates that war extends beyond physical destruction, it deeply erodes the emotional lives, aspirations, and moral consciousness of the younger generation. In a postcolonial context, the youth become casualties of unresolved political struggles and fractured nationalist dreams, forced to sacrifice personal happiness for a conflict they inherit rather than choose.

A Respectable Woman, authored by Easterine Kire, presents a deeply personal narrative of Naga society recovering from the violence of the Second World War and the

lingering psychological scars of colonial and postcolonial subjugation. Through the memories of Japanese invasion, displacement, and destruction associated with the Battle of Kohima in the second World War, the novel captures the profound psychic and social ruptures experienced by the Naga community. The war is not represented as a historical event confined to the battlefield, rather, it becomes an enduring force that continues to shape the collective identity and consciousness of the Naga people across generations, war exceeds the boundaries of the battlefield and extends into the inner lives of the ordinary people.

Kire's portrayal of violence extends beyond physical suffering and enters the emotional lives of her characters, revealing silence, fear, and psychological fragmentation. The memories of war persist within homes, relationships, and everyday existence, demonstrating how colonial warfare invades even the most intimate spaces of life. By focusing on ordinary individuals rather than heroic nationalist narratives, Kire foregrounds the human cost of violence and exposes how war reshapes memory, identity, family structures, and social relations in Naga society.

In the novel *A Respectable Woman*, the memories of the Japanese invasion and Allied bombing during the Battle of Kohima continue to haunt the characters long after the physical war has ended. The home, which traditionally symbolizes safety and belonging, is transformed into a space of fear, anxiety, and traumatic remembrance. Survivors carry the psychological scars of violence within their everyday lives, revealing how war persists not only through physical destruction but also through memory and silence. Their silence becomes a strategy of endurance and survival, not weakness or forgetfulness. In a society deeply affected by colonial warfare, silence functions as a protective mechanism to bear trauma that cannot easily be articulated. The novel therefore illustrates the intergenerational persistence of war, where the emotional aftermath of violence continues to shape identities, relationships, and domestic spaces even in the postwar period.

At the outset of the novel, Khonuo reminisces and recounts the horrors of the World War-II to her daughter Kevinuo. Khonuo's brother Amo joins as soldier in the British Army to fight against the Japanese troupes in World War-II after completing his tenth class and participates in the Battle of Kohima despite the reluctance and fear of his parents. His parents' resistance signifies the anxiety of families who feared the devastating consequences of war and the loss of their children in wars. Subsequently, Amo dies of a war injury in later years

Kevinuo's childhood is marked by profound personal loss and emotional insecurity. Her father, who suffers from a weak heart, dies prematurely, and this tragedy is soon followed by her army uncle Amo's death when Kevinuo is only seven years old. Amo dies of a war injury after the splinter gets punctured near to his heart. These incidents expose her to fear, grief, and instability at a very young age, shaping her psychological consciousness. In the context of the novel, such personal suffering is closely connected to the larger atmosphere of war, uncertainty, and social disruption in Naga society.

Atsa, Kevinuo's grandmother, becomes mentally unstable after the death of her beloved son Amo, revealing the devastating psychological impact of loss and war-related suffering on ordinary individuals. Unable to recover from the grief, she lives in emotional despair and eventually dies of a broken heart six years after her son's death. In the following year, Kevinuo's grandfather also dies, overwhelmed by sorrow after losing his wife. Through these successive deaths, the novel portrays how war and violence destroy not only individuals but entire family structures across generations. Grief becomes cumulative, passing from one member of the family to another, creating an atmosphere of emotional collapse and silence. The novel, thus emphasizes that the effects of violence and loss are not temporary, they continue to haunt domestic life long after the actual events have passed, demonstrating the deep psychological scars left upon the Naga society.

“Violence can become so embedded in ordinary life that it ceases to appear extraordinary.”

(Das, Veena. 2007)

Kire's narrative vividly portrays the psychological toll of war and violence on ordinary Naga civilians. Fear becomes a constant companion of life, as people feel,

“we were no longer safe in our own homes.”

(A Respectable Woman, p.58)

The constant threat of army raids, curfews, and shootings creates an atmosphere of anxiety, insecurity, and terror. Civilians live in continuous anticipation of violence, where even stepping outside during curfew could lead to death. This perpetual fear destroys any sense of peace or emotional stability. Villagers are forced to sit outside without food or water, leading not only to physical suffering but also to emotional humiliation and helplessness. The novel also reflects the emotional devastation caused by disappearances and deaths. Many men who joined the Naga army,

“...disappeared because they were all killed, a whole generation of men disappeared”

(ARW, p.58)

It shows a sense of hopelessness and generational loss. Families are left without closure, constantly haunted by uncertainty and mourning. Even when life appears to regain some semblance of normal, sudden shootings force people to run home in panic. This indicates that violence becomes internalized in the minds of civilians, also war destroys not only physical lives but also the psychological well-being, and emotional security of people.

“Life was so much worse than it was during the Japanese war. In those days although bombs were falling all around us, we were never the target of the bombings. British and Indian soldiers came by the thousands but we never fear them; we knew they will there to

protect our lands. But now people had grown to fear the site of the Indian soldiers."

(ARW, p.59)

The above lines reflect the tragic transformation of the relationship between the Naga people and the Indian state. When compared Japanese invasion during the Battle of Kohima with the later militarized condition in Nagaland, a disturbing conclusion may be drawn. Life after colonialism has become even more fearful than wartime itself. During the Second World War, although bombs and violence surrounded the people, the enemy was clearly identifiable, and the British and Indian soldiers were perceived as protectors defending the land from invasion. However, in the postcolonial period, the presence of Indian soldiers no longer signifies safety but fear, suspicion, and oppression.

It exposes the disillusionment that independence, which is expected to bring freedom and security, instead results in militarization and alienation for the Naga people. The fear of Indian soldiers symbolizes the breakdown of trust between the state and the local population, where the army becomes associated with surveillance and violence rather than protection.

Thus, Easterine Kire in her novella *Life on Hold* portrays war and violence as destructive forces that invade innocent youth, humiliate human relationships, engrave deep psychological scars and create enduring emotional suffering on individuals and society alike. And, *A Respectable Woman* ultimately reveals that the deepest wounds inflicted by war and violence are not always visible on the battlefield, but remain buried within the minds, memories, and emotional lives of the survivors, where fear, grief, silence, and loss continue to haunt generations long after the sound of guns and swords has faded away.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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