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## CONFLICT AND ALIENATION IN VEIO POU'S *WAITING FOR THE DUST TO SETTLE*

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### Abstract

Winner of The Gordon Graham Prize for Naga Literature 2021, Veio Pou's debut novel, *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* (2020) is a sensitive chronicle of the struggles, realities, and resilience of the Naga community. Influenced and motivated by realism, Pou has drafted an intriguing tale by interweaving reality and fiction to bring the neglected and unheard narratives of the Naga people to the fore through Rakovie, the protagonist. The metanarrative delineates the Oinam incident followed by the fierce Operation Bluebird, the counter-insurgency operation led by the Assam Rifles, stirring up human rights violations on a massive scale. The novel charts the factional disputes among the various insurgent organizations and the ripples they created. Pou also outlines the ethnic conflicts within the Naga community and their grave repercussions. The proposed paper seeks to place the novel in a wider global context and examine the universal echoes of such ethnic conflicts. It also aims to analyze the State's use of violence to uphold its sovereignty. The paper explores civilian oppression by the armed forces and also attempts to understand the issues from the perspective of the soldiers. The proposed paper invariably endeavors to investigate the experiences and consequences of alienation triggered by the aforementioned events and offers suggestions for building a cohesive society.

Keywords: Conflict, resilience, metanarrative, Naga community, universal echoes, alienation.

Conflict and alienation are two interconnected concepts that can have a significant impact on individuals, relationships, and societies. Conflict can manifest in different forms, including verbal disputes, ideological clashes, power struggles, or even physical violence. They can arise in personal relationships, social and political arenas, and across diverse cultural, religious, or ethnic groups. Alienation refers to a sense of estrangement, disconnection, or isolation experienced by individuals from themselves, others, or society. It can manifest as a feeling of being separated or detached from a sense of purpose, meaning, belonging, or even from one's own emotions and

desires. Alienation can result from various factors, including social, economic, cultural, or psychological, and can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and a diminished sense of self-worth, contributing to social unrest, disengagement from civic life, and a breakdown in interpersonal relationships.

Veio Pou's *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* (2020) poignantly paints a realistic picture of the struggles, sufferings, marginalization, and disillusionment experienced by the victims of ethnic conflicts in general and the people of the Northeast in particular. Narrated in the third person, the narrative is interwoven with realities and is a fusion

of fiction, history, and politics, attempting to voice the issues which remain unheard and unaddressed even today. The author uses Rakovei, the protagonist, to bring to light the plight of the Nagas through several events that he encounters within the course of this novel. Pou depicts the agony of an individual trapped in a hostile environment.

Rakovei's uncle, Lounu, reflects a deep sense of alienation. Aggrieved and angered at the corrosion of society and the dishonest ways of working brought about by corruption, he impulsively hits a government officer with a chair. The act, exaggerated by the local newspapers, apparently becomes a site for the valley-hill animosity in general and a Meitei-Naga conflict in particular. The episode changes Lounu's life forever as he is forced to change his identity from Lounu to Lenny. Assam Rifles have been given the task to pursue and arrest him, thus making him a fugitive moving from one village to another with makeshift homes. He becomes an alien to his own village as Pou reflects, "Lenny couldn't really live his life even in his own home." (61) However, Lenny's loyalty lies deep with the members of the Naga Underground as he defends them while he is being questioned by the Tiger Major of the Assam Rifles. He feels piqued when the Major refers to them as 'militants' and almost unconsciously responds that "They are our 'freedom fighters'." (98)

States can subject their citizens to violence, oppression, and suffering in the name of protecting their sovereignty. Authoritarian regimes often prioritize maintaining control and suppressing dissent over the well-being and rights of their citizens. They may employ tactics such as censorship, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings to silence opposition and maintain their grip on power. The helplessness due to exclusion from the decision-making process, dehumanization, and denial of freedom of expression push the victims toward the darkness of alienation. Citizens who challenge the government's authority or advocate for change can face severe repercussions, including violence and persecution. Governments may resort to violent means including crackdowns on protests, demonstrations, or political opposition. State security forces, such as the police

or military, may employ excessive force, leading to injuries, deaths, and widespread human rights abuses. Dissenting voices, activists, and journalists are particularly vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. Governments may curtail civil liberties and impose strict regulations to maintain control. This can involve restricting freedom of speech, assembly, and association, limiting media freedoms, and undermining the independence of the judiciary. These restrictions can lead to a stifling of democratic processes and an increase in suffering. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act, AFSPA, which confers exclusive powers on the military, disgruntles the local populace. Pou states that AFSPA authorizes the "army personnel to arrest, detain, shoot or even kill on mere suspicion and without having to explain their actions and without being persecuted." (180) The people have felt betrayed by the Government of India ever since the promulgation of the Act. The Act, which was meant to give the army a sense of security and immunity against the ambushes, has been excessively used to oppress the natives. AFSPA virtually suspends the fundamental rights of the citizens dwelling in the 'disturbed areas.' Joyson, Rakovei's cousin, carefully analyses that "Instead of building a country on mutual respect and dignity, AFSPA only alienates and embitters the minds and hearts of the people." (195) Governments may target specific groups based on their ethnicity, religion, or political beliefs, subjecting them to discrimination and persecution. This can include marginalization, exclusion from political participation, denial of basic services, and violent repression. The state may enact policies that systematically oppress and marginalize certain communities, exacerbating their suffering and perpetuating social divisions. Governments can subject their citizens to economic exploitation in the name of protecting sovereignty. Citizens may be subjected to poverty, lack of basic services, and economic disparities, while those in power benefit from the exploitation of national resources. It is important to understand that while governments may claim to protect their sovereignty as a justification for such actions, these practices often violate human rights and undermine the well-being of their citizens. The unbridled power that the

Armed Forces exercised to inflict atrocities and pain on the commoners during Operation Bluebird, engendered feelings of resentment, abandonment, and despair, making terror and insecurity, fairly visible. The brutalities of the troops had destroyed families and rendered the innocent people, distraught and helpless. The villagers craved justice and their voices to be heard. But they were the subalterns, their voices were subdued. The gross violation and abuse of human rights on a massive scale, left the people disillusioned and deceived. Nandita Haksar and Sebastian M Hongray in their book, *The Judgement that Never Came – Army Rule in North East India*, apprise that “*The Times of India* carried a report on January 15, 1991, entitled “Army alienates Assam populace.” (241)

The Indo-Naga conflict began with the struggle for the Naga Sovereignty. A struggle for the creation of an independent Naga nation began under the leadership of A.Z. Phizo, the father of Naga Nationalism, in the 1940s. The ethnic conflict worsened as the 1950s witnessed the climax of the Naga insurgency. The barbaric acts of mass abductions, murders, and rapes by the Indian armed forces failed to provide the Nagas with a sense of belonging to India. Consequently, a sense of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ became a pertinent question among the Nagas. The brutal use of force and oppression gave birth to about a hundred rebel groups within the region. These insurgent organizations, operating since the mid-twenties, reflect the grievances, hardships, alienation, and despair experienced by the inhabitants. The insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) are the outcomes of how an oppressive military force alienates, subjugates, and marginalizes people of a particular ethnicity. Fela Amiri Uhuru, in her paper entitled, *Frantz Fanon, Alienation, and the Psychology of the Oppressed* has carefully explored the psyche of the oppressed and alienated and comments, “Fanon urged that alienated people recover their material and spiritual losses through violence.”

The dynamics of power and the powerless render the powerless, alienated. The atrocities committed by the Assam Rifles on the innocent villagers as part of the retaliatory action against the

undergrounds’ attack on the Oinam Hill post is a display of indiscriminate power by the military force. The launch of Operation Bluebird subjected civilians to immense suffering. The excruciating pain when people were severely beaten, maimed, and killed had severe psychological repercussions as people died due to trauma and as Haksar and Hongray assert, “some had “lost their mental balance due to fear and serious beating”.” (30) Young women were abducted and raped. The most agonizing event that Pou sheds light on was when a pregnant woman was refused shelter by the army and had to go through her labor and deliver her baby in a completely open and public space with everyone desecrating “a human being reduced to the status of an animal.” (103). The child did not survive. Human dignity was brutally humiliated. The human rights violation that took place left each individual torn and alienated. Haksar and Hongray contend that “The pain, the sorrows, the anguish, the irreparable loss or the level of anxiety experienced by every man, woman, and child during Operation Bluebird can never be truly documented.” (70)

The innocent people of Oinam and the surrounding villages were made the scapegoats for the actions of the NSCN, paying the price with their lives and belongings. The villages were isolated from the rest of the world. The civil administration and authorities were denuded of their powers and were denied entry into these villages by the Assam Rifles. The villagers were stripped of their liberties. The cruelties unfurled one after the other. People, regardless of their age and ethnicity, were detained and tortured for days on end. They were even given electric shocks. Haksar and Hongray assert that “The fear psychosis to which villagers seem to have been subjected to is shocking to one’s conscience.” (108) With their houses dismantled, granaries emptied, paddy fields destroyed, homes ransacked, and loved ones brutally beaten and killed, anxiety, fear, and trauma gripped their lives. The unbridled power exercised by the Army during Operation Bluebird made the victims question the government and be unsure of their own identity. This confusion regarding identity and belonging compel civilians to form an ambivalent view of the armed forces and other groups, leaving them with a heightened sense

of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair. Haksar and Hongray have observed that "From July to October 1987 the horror unfolded before the eyes of the people who witnessed their fathers tortured to death, their sons beaten and maimed, young girls taken to the officers like sacrificial lambs, and homes burnt to cinders." (28)

The protagonist, Rakovie, dreams of becoming an army officer ever since he was a child. His desire gets deeper each time he sees the military convoy pass through the town. He used to admire their olive green and camouflage uniforms, their automatic guns, their tough personalities, intimidating attitudes, military discipline, fearless patrol, and the powerful aura of the soldiers. Pou narrates, "He had a deep desire to be like them, to wear their clothes, to wield a gun, and to be 'powerful'." (21) He demands an army uniform, one of those tiny ones he has seen hanging on the roadside shops, as a reward for securing the first position in his class. Though bewildered, his parents had to capitulate to his demand. Clad in his brand-new military uniform, Rakovie plays an army officer with his friends and has an incredible time. With a deepened fascination, he starts to envision the power he will possess once he gets into the army boots. Pou recounts, "He couldn't wait for the day when he would become one of those tough, power-wielding soldiers. Everyone would learn to fear him, he thought." (23) However, the story of atrocities on Grandfather Voba by the men in uniform, for being a *vahtamai*, a messenger, in the Naga National Council (NNC) and joining the freedom struggle in spirit, culminating in his arrest and subsequent demise, is the first blow to Rakovie's dream. Reflecting on Operation Bluebird, Rakovie says, "It was a horrifying experience and I also felt terribly betrayed." (189) His dream was completely shattered by the brutality on his uncle, Lenny, for defending the members of the Underground that rendered him partially paralyzed and immovable for life. The plight of ordinary people that he witnessed further isolated him from his long-cherished dream. He comments, "I never knew they were such brutal soldiers, torturing innocent people. What I saw them do to the villagers was unforgivable. Their torture left people like my uncle impaired for life. That was

the biggest blow to my first dream in life." (189) The Army men who used to blow a sense of veneration into Rakovie and stir him up with thrill and delight by their mere presence, now only invoked indignation, anguish, and contempt. Rakovie experiences the loss of a dream and feels alienated from his childhood or rather, from a part of his own self, and "His dream of becoming an army officer had faded away." (123)

The oppression of civilians by armies can take various forms and occur in different contexts. There have been instances where armies have engaged in oppressive practices and have been involved in human rights abuses against civilians. This includes extrajudicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, arbitrary arrests, and forced displacement. These actions can cause immense suffering and undermine the security and well-being of civilians. Targeted violence against civilians can lead to deaths, physical wounds, and disabilities. Army oppression can involve sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, and exploitation, perpetrated against civilians. These acts not only cause physical harm but also leave deep emotional and psychological scars. Survivors of sexual violence may experience feelings of shame, guilt, and trauma, leading to long-lasting suffering. During times of occupation, armies may impose strict control over civilian populations. This can involve restricting movement, imposing curfews, conducting house searches, and confiscating property. Such measures can limit the freedoms and rights of civilians, leading to a sense of oppression, alienation, and vulnerability. Army oppression can disrupt economic activities, leading to the loss of livelihoods and economic hardship. Armies may forcibly recruit civilians, including children, into their ranks or subject them to forced labor and may even use them as human shields at times. In armed conflicts, they may cause harm to civilians unintentionally through collateral damage or by conducting indiscriminate attacks. Failure to take adequate precautions to protect civilians can result in civilian casualties, destruction of homes and infrastructure, and displacement. Army oppression can force civilians to flee their homes, leading to displacement and the loss of their communities and support networks. Forced migration can lead to

immense suffering and loss for civilian populations caught in the crossfire. The constant threat, fear, and violence experienced under army oppression can result in severe psychological trauma. Civilians may develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. The enduring psychological impact can affect individuals, families, and entire communities, hindering their ability to recover and rebuild their lives. One of the significant issues in instances of army oppression is the lack of accountability and justice for human rights violations. When armies face impunity for their actions, it perpetuates a cycle of abuse and undermines the trust and confidence of civilians in their own security forces. Army oppression can sow division and mistrust within communities. The use of divide-and-rule tactics, forced recruitment, and the creation of informant networks can lead to suspicion, paranoia, and a breakdown of social cohesion. This social fragmentation exacerbates the suffering of individuals, further isolates communities, and makes post-conflict reconciliation challenging.

However, it is important to acknowledge and understand that the insecurities and a hardened stance of army soldiers towards civilians can arise from various factors, including the nature of their job, experiences in conflict zones, and the dynamics of the military-civilian relationship. Soldiers operating in conflict zones often face real and perceived threats from various sources, including insurgents, terrorists, and hostile local populations. This constant exposure to danger can lead to heightened levels of vigilance which can translate into a generalized sense of mistrust and suspicion towards the civilian population, as they are often unable to distinguish between civilians and potential adversaries. Soldiers may witness or experience traumatic events during their service, such as combat, casualties, or attacks. These experiences can lead to emotional and psychological distress, potentially resulting in defensive or hardened attitudes as a coping mechanism to protect themselves from further harm. Soldiers often endure significant physical and emotional hardships during their service. They may witness and

experience violence, loss of comrades, and traumatic events that can deeply affect their mental well-being. Soldiers often spend extended periods away from their families and friends, and the unique challenges they face during their deployment can make it difficult for them to reconnect with and reintegrate into civilian society. This can lead to a sense of isolation and a feeling of being disconnected from the people they are meant to protect. In many military operations, soldiers may be deployed to regions with unfamiliar cultures, languages, and customs. These differences can create barriers to communication and understanding between soldiers and civilians. There can be a lack of understanding or misconceptions among civilians about the realities of military life. This can result in stereotypes or stigmatization of soldiers, leading to a sense of being misunderstood or unfairly judged. Such attitudes can contribute to a divide between soldiers and civilians, exacerbating feelings of alienation and insecurity. The insecurities of the army personnel, posted in troubled states like that of the Northeast and Kashmir, never let them completely trust the locals. The fear of being killed in ambushes never lets them wander on the highways or the streets, alone, and they always patrol in groups and move across the towns and highways in large convoys, never parting with their rifles and pistols. The situation, however, is in complete contrast in other parts of the country. Rakovie is shocked at the sight of a Sikh Major, in his olive-green military uniform, riding his olive-green Royal Enfield alone in Delhi. Pou narrates, "Rakovie craned his neck to see who was guarding the army man, but there was no one! The major was out on the road, riding his bike alone! For the first time in his life, Rakovie came face to face with a major without a platoon of soldiers surrounding him." (178) It is then that he realizes that not only his people but even the otherwise powerful army is equally insecure and estranged in the northeast region. The Undergrounds and their supporters fail to provide them with a sense of security and reliability. Speaking about their secure positioning in Delhi, Joyson comments, "This is not Manipur or Nagaland or the Northeast!" (179) Pondering upon Joyson's reflections, Rakovie compares the state of

affairs back home with that of Delhi and begins to understand the struggles and anxieties of the Armed Forces in his native state. As he puts the pieces together, he ascertains that the Army in the Northeast is skeptical and vulnerable whereas, in Delhi, it is indeed on a firmer footing and relatively safer which is why "In Delhi, there were no military convoys storming down the roads. There were no foot soldiers patrolling the locality. There were no search operations." (182) The soldiers, living in extreme conditions, guarding our borders and protecting the nation against attacks by our adversaries, are further alienated by a lack of love and family life. The separation from their families and tensions back home, that of aging and ailing parents, children's education, and marital discords, often keep them cold and detached.

Pou draws our attention to the fact that the villagers were not only isolated by the Army but also by the members of the NSCN. The Naga Undergrounds, proudly called 'national workers' and 'freedom fighters' didn't come out of their hiding places to rescue the villagers when the Assam Rifles adopted extreme and ruthless measures to harass and torture them. Pou asks, "Why didn't they come forward and defend the people whose freedom they claimed they were fighting for?" (85) The people were once again disillusioned after the ceasefire agreements were signed. In his research paper entitled *Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: Changing Dynamics*, Jayadeva Uyangoda observes that "Attempts at a negotiated settlement, with or without ceasefires, have not only failed but have redefined the conflict." The undergrounds, then, roamed freely on the streets, extorting money from the locals and serving their own interests. The fervor and spirit to attain freedom for their people had faded away. The people who used to voluntarily donate their hard-earned money to the cause of the 'Naga nation', now did that out of dread. The commoners were doubly oppressed. Pou avers, "Once the people had feared the Indian army, but now they were afraid of the bullets of the undergrounds." (220) The people felt increasingly alienated as the battle for dignity and freedom was long lost. All those years of struggle brought them nothing but searing pain, torture, and suffering.

The NSCN, an insurgent outfit, that came into existence in 1980 as a rebellious response to the arbitrariness of the Indian Armed Forces, underwent a fierce blood-soaked split and was warring its own self, barely eight years after its formation. The dissenting opinions and fallout among the three chief leaders – Isak Chishi Swu, S.S. Khaplang, and Th Muivah, a Sema, Hemi, and Tangkhul Naga respectively, ignited a factional war. What followed was gruesome bloodshed, with members killing each other. Hundreds of cadres were slaughtered by their own men. Pou writes, "The wounds within the large Naga family deepened with each fight." (201) Resultantly, the NSCN broke up into NSCN-IM and NSCN-K, the former led by Isak Chishi Swu and Th Muivah and the latter by S.S. Khaplang. The cadres, lost and alienated by the divide, were impelled to make a choice between the polarized organizations. The broiling conflicts in and around the forests of Burma created a hostile environment inducing feelings of estrangement among the undergrounds.

Pou, in a section of the novel, narrates the story of Daniel, Lenny's friend and a member of the fervent nationalist movement since the early days of its inception. Daniel and his brother Khapulou were callously killed by the enemy wing. Daniel, who has been with the UGs since the NNC days, experiences an acute sense of loss and is perturbed at the split of the NSCN and embittered relationships. He experiences a kind of meaninglessness of his purpose. After a number of failed attempts at persuading Daniel to join the stronger IM wing, his colleagues, annoyed with his unrelenting spirit, claim his life. Pou comments, "And the infighting continues, Naga against Naga." (204) What began as a war against the Indian Army culminated into a macabre war against their own people, ruthlessly claiming their lives and leaving their families broken, traumatized, and alienated. The most heart-wrenching part about Daniel's death was that "he was killed by one of his own." (129)

The trauma of Daniel's brutal killing throws Rakhune, his beloved wife and Lenny's cousin, into a fit of grave depression causing her to lose her sanity. Her behavior turns erratic. Her deteriorating mental state scares even her own children. Her parents become helpless. She constantly juggled between

mourning, turning violent, and hallucinating. The incident wrecks her psyche so severely that she sometimes reimagines the grisly scene and runs to fetch weapons, determined to avenge her husband's murder. She even frets for her children's safety and rushes to protect them. Pou details how "Sometimes she turned violent and looked for *daos* and knives, saying she would kill the culprits hiding in the backyard. At times she shrieked and rushed to protect her children, fearing that the killers had come to kill them too." (136)

The trauma of her husband's death and estrangement from her surroundings renders her mentally incapable of bringing up and providing a secure future for her children. As a result of her wretched condition, her children are taken away from her. The separation from her children expedites the process of her alienation. She says, "Call me Rachapfue, the one who has been cursed by God. There's nothing left of me. I'm cursed." (139) The fateful events have devastating psychological implications. Not only the elders but the children too, were traumatized. The horror of his father's merciless killing was still afresh in Chasu's mind. Rakhune's degenerating condition further damaged the child's psyche. Deprived of his parents' love, he feels lonely, his behavior turns capricious and he seldom smiles. Rakhune's untimely and unfortunate death leaves the children broken and inconsolable. As Pou tragically puts it, "Without a word, the mother of two left the world that could not offer her refuge." (159)

Another significant issue that Pou delineates is the ethnic conflicts and their repercussions. History is flooded with numerous examples of ethnic conflicts that have caused significant pain and suffering. The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 was a devastating conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in Rwanda. It resulted in widespread violence, mass killings, sexual violence, displacement, and deep psychological trauma for the survivors. The Holocaust of 1941-1945 was the systematic genocide of six million Jews by Nazi Germany during World War II. The Jewish population was targeted due to their ethnicity and religious beliefs. The Holocaust involved forced labor, mass killings,

concentration camps with gas chambers, and extermination camps, causing immeasurable suffering, loss of life, and long-lasting trauma. The Israel-Palestine conflict is a complex and long-standing dispute between Israelis and Palestinians over land, borders, and self-determination. The conflict has caused immense suffering for both Israelis and Palestinians, with loss of life, injuries, and psychological trauma. The conflict has led to the displacement of Palestinians, the demolition of homes, and restrictions on the movement of people and goods while Israelis have also faced security concerns and acts of violence, including suicide bombings and rocket attacks launched from Gaza. Numerous reports of human rights abuses have included excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and torture. Displacement, violence, fear, and trauma haunt the people. The suffering of the adversaries is deeply intertwined and interconnected. Efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution and a two-state solution have been ongoing, but progress has been challenging due to deep-seated grievances, political obstacles, and differing visions for the future. The breakup of Yugoslavia led to a series of ethnic conflicts in the Balkans, popularly known as the Balkan Wars that went on from 1991 to 2001, resulting in widespread violence and suffering. The wars, particularly in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, and Kosovo, involved ethnic cleansing, mass killings, rape, displacement, and the destruction of homes and infrastructure. The conflicts left deep scars and displaced thousands of individuals, causing lasting pain and trauma. The Sudanese Civil War from 1983 to 2005 was fought between the central government and rebel groups, primarily in Southern Sudan. The conflict was rooted in ethnic and religious divisions, with the predominantly Arab-Muslim north clashing with the predominantly African-Christian south. The war resulted in the displacement of millions, famine, widespread sexual violence, and countless lives lost. The Partition of India in 1947 led to one of the largest mass migrations in history, accompanied by communal violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The violence resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. People experienced

immense pain, the loss of loved ones, and the destruction of their homes and communities. The Darfur Conflict from 2003 to the present, in Sudan, involves ethnic tensions between the Arab-dominated government and non-Arab ethnic groups. It has resulted in mass killings, displacement, sexual violence, and humanitarian crises, leading to extensive suffering and loss of life. Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis from 2017 to the present is another significant addition to the list. The ethnic conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State has caused immense suffering for the Rohingya Muslim minority. Widespread violence, including killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement, has resulted in a refugee crisis as Rohingya people flee to neighboring countries in search of safety. South Sudan Civil War from 2013 to the present has had significant ethnic dimensions, primarily between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups. The conflict has led to widespread violence, displacement, food insecurity, and loss of life, causing immense suffering for the civilian population. In his overarching book, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Neil DeVotta outlines:

The more particularistic interactions permeate institutions representing the state, the more likely it is that those marginalized will mobilize in opposition. The more ethnically based such particularism is, the more the state would likely regress to ethnocracy. And when such an ethnocracy and its accompanying institutional decay force those dispossessed and discriminated against to retaliate by mobilizing along ethnonational lines...the stage will be set for ethnic violence. (16)

These examples highlight the global impact of ethnic conflicts and their severe consequences on affected communities. They result in loss of life, displacement, destruction of infrastructure, psychological trauma, and long-lasting social, economic, and political repercussions. Pou's discourse on the ethnic conflict within the Naga community is an attempt to echo the universal nature and reverberations of such strife.

The clash of opinions among the several Naga tribes has waged a factional war. This intra-ethnic conflict, primarily between the Nagas, Kukis, and Meiteis, has been another setback to the nationalist movement. The hostilities among the tribes isolate the common people and enforce their alienation. Long-term neighbors and friends suddenly find themselves trapped in perplexity. This internal strife has destroyed the fabric of Naga unity and the future of Naga Nationalism lay in shambles. Pou sheds light on the Naga-Kuki discord where friends turn foes, thirsty for each other's blood. The ethnic violence carried out on an unprecedented level killed hundreds from both sides. Insensitive and alien to their own people, the Nagas didn't even spare the Kuki tourists traveling on NH 39. Kukis responded with a similar barbarity in other places. Joyson believes that "the 'warrior spirit' in us has driven out our sanity." (203) The UGs too, weren't left out and started getting increasingly involved in this ethnic clash, thus aggravating the matter. Donald L. Horowitz in his comprehensive book *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* focuses on the fierce rivalries between the ethnic groups that "see their vital interests threatened by other groups." (565) Thus, the petty disputes that could have been quelled, took the form of a fierce factional fight, leaving the two adversaries famished for vengeance. The conflict was further intensified by the identity politics that came into play with the hill districts bearing the repercussions as "Villages were uprooted and people were displaced." (151) Countless people, expressing grave apprehensions, had to flee their homes and take refuge in other villages where people from their tribe dwelled substantially. They felt rootless as "they could never go back to their original homes." (153) Homes were burnt down, families were destroyed, the valley-hill divide grew wider, the wounds cut deep, the bonds became meaningless and people felt lost. This marred the spirit of the movement.

Ethnic conflicts often involve violence, including acts of warfare, terrorism, and targeted attacks. This results in the loss of human lives and widespread physical injuries. People may experience the pain of losing loved ones, witnessing acts of violence, or personally enduring physical harm,



leaving lasting scars and trauma. They can lead to alienation among individuals and communities involved. They often create a deep sense of division between different ethnic groups. This 'us vs. them' mentality can fuel animosity and distrust, making it difficult for people from different ethnic backgrounds to relate to and understand each other. This division leads to social isolation and alienation. Ethnic conflicts can result in systematic discrimination and marginalization of certain ethnic groups. Minority communities may face exclusion, prejudice, lack of opportunities, and denial of access to resources of livelihood, education, healthcare, and other essential services, thus feeling disconnected from the wider society. Ethnic conflicts can also result in forced displacement and the creation of refugee populations. Individuals and families are compelled to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. Displaced individuals often face tremendous challenges in adapting to new environments, accessing basic necessities, and integrating into host communities, which exacerbates their suffering. This sense of displacement and being uprooted from one's home can lead to profound feelings of alienation and loss of identity. Ethnic conflicts can also result in the destruction of infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals, and essential services. Entire communities may be reduced to ruins. The loss of one's physical environment and community ties can deepen feelings of despair, helplessness, and grief. Ethnic conflicts can devastate economies, causing widespread poverty, unemployment, and economic instability. Loss of livelihoods, businesses, and infrastructure further aggravates the suffering of individuals and communities. Economic hardship adds to the burden of pain and can perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality. Ethnic conflicts wreak severe psychological consequences on individuals and communities. Witnessing or experiencing violence, loss of loved ones, or being exposed to hate speech and propaganda can cause trauma, anxiety, and depression. Individuals may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues and may even exhibit suicidal tendencies. Violence becomes an integral part of an ethnic conflict and bloodshed becomes

inevitable. Critiquing the monstrosity of ethnic violence, Horowitz argues that "a bloody phenomenon cannot be explained by a bloodless theory." (140) The ongoing fear and uncertainty associated with living in a conflict zone can also cause intense emotional anguish. Ethnic conflicts can have an intergenerational impact. Children growing up in conflict zones often experience disrupted education, limited access to healthcare, and exposure to violence, leaving them vulnerable to physical and psychological harm. Another repercussion of ethnic conflicts can be the destruction or suppression of cultural practices, languages, and traditions. When individuals are unable to freely express their cultural identity or when their cultural heritage is under threat, they may feel a deep sense of alienation and loss. Cultural alienation can be particularly impactful as it affects individuals' sense of belonging and their connection to their roots.

The segregation of the people from the Northeast has implanted a feeling of resentment against the mainland Indians. The tendency of people to see and treat the Northeast populace differently makes their assimilation a cumbersome process. They are always made to feel an outsider and denied opportunities to fully integrate into the mainland. Owing to their facial features, people associate them more with Nepal or China than India and call them derogatory names. This identity politics practiced by the majority against the Northeast Indians puts and confines them to boxes, marginalizes and estranges them. Lalboi, Rakovie's friend, is deeply pained to see how people from the mainland call them 'chinky'. Infuriated at being called that, he asks Rakovie, "How long can we tolerate them calling us names because of our appearance?" (171) Provoked at such a treatment, if they react, they are denied justice as even the authorities are indifferent. This racial prejudice and indifference make victims of such identity politics feel helpless and significantly contribute to their disillusionment, and act as a hindrance to their assimilation. The underlying manifestation of such ethnic stereotyping alienates them and inhibits a sense of belonging. No mention of the Northeast, the history and culture of its people, and their way

of life in the textbooks clearly reflect the plight and marginalization of the region and its inhabitants. Abandoned by the mainstream media and the general perception of the Northeast “as a kind of wasteland, sparsely inhabited by some wild tribes.” (175) further alienate them. Joyson criticizes the government for their embittered experiences of isolation and loneliness outside their home state and says, “As people from the Northeast, there is a lot to blame on the government’s neglect of the region for too long.” (175)

Violence becomes an easy outlet for pent-up frustration for those feeling marginalized and voiceless. Consequently, people become susceptible to extremist ideologies as the extremist outfits provide a sense of camaraderie and belongingness amidst turbulence and abandonment. Communities get trapped in a vicious cycle of oppression, retaliation, and poverty. The strain of unresolved conflict wound the collective consciousness of the community at the receiving end of atrocities. As a result of such conflicts, communities break up, factions emerge, rifts widen and divisions deepen, thus disrupting social cohesion. The perpetual state of conflict between the armed forces and the civilians becomes another case for alienation. Memories of historical injustices on both sides lead to insecurity, vulnerability, and loss of faith in society and the institutions meant to protect it.

It becomes imperative to understand that upholding sovereignty should not come at the expense of the fundamental rights and dignity of individuals. International human rights standards and the rule of law provide frameworks to challenge and address such abuses, emphasizing the importance of accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights within states. Instances of army oppression of civilians underscore the critical need for effective oversight, accountability mechanisms, and respect for human rights within the armed forces to prevent and address such abuses. Establishing mechanisms for justice, supporting mental health services, encouraging respect for human rights, providing humanitarian aid, and working towards sustainable peace and security are crucial in mitigating the impact of such oppression and facilitating healing and recovery. It is

crucial to acknowledge and support soldiers in their efforts, address their mental health needs, and bridge the gap between military and civilian communities. By promoting understanding, empathy, and open dialogue, we can work towards fostering a better environment for both soldiers and civilians. Addressing the pain and suffering caused by ethnic conflicts requires comprehensive efforts focused on conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. This includes providing immediate humanitarian assistance, access to healthcare and mental health services, promoting reconciliation, and addressing the underlying causes of the conflicts. Talking about the conflict among Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim elites, Uyangoda posits that “A protracted conflict requires a protracted process of political transformation. Since the question of state power is at the core of the conflict, a credible short-term path to peace should begin with negotiations that aim at, and lead to, reconstituting state power along ethnic lines.” Long-term initiatives to rebuild infrastructure, restore social cohesion, and promote economic development are essential for alleviating the suffering of affected populations. Efforts to rebuild shattered lives become vitally important in order to forge and build a cohesive society.

It is time that a bridge be built cross-culturally in order to have a profound understanding of the rich and diverse history, culture, customs, and traditions of the people of the Northeast. We need to delve deeper in order to assess, understand and address their needs, and the issues and challenges that they face in everyday life. Compassion and empathy are required to pull the Nagas out of their estranged world. People of the mainland need to be increasingly accommodating to drive away the murk of racial prejudices. The hostilities and disillusionment ought to be replaced by trust in the Armed Forces. The governments need to stop neglecting the region, its people, and their development. They should be given sufficient space and a platform to communicate their concerns. The Union Government should have more representatives from the Northeast. They have endured suffering, turmoil, and injustices, have struggled relentlessly, and spent many turbulent

years in the pursuit of their own distinct identity. Having spent several years in seclusion, they need to be embraced and assimilated. Segregated for decades, they now need to be stopped from being seen as the 'Other'. While conflict is often viewed negatively due to its potential for harm and disruption, it can also serve as a catalyst for positive change and growth. By addressing and resolving conflicts constructively, it becomes possible to build stronger relationships, bridge differences, foster innovation, and create social transformation. It's worth noting that conflict and alienation can often be intertwined. Understanding and addressing both concepts are crucial for promoting harmony, understanding, and well-being in personal and social contexts.

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