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Dynamics of Trauma in Easterine Kire's Bitterwormwood

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Abstract:- Trauma in the general consensus refers to a specific, sudden event or experience that alters one's way of perceiving the world. North-East literature as a whole encompasses a body of works that prides itself for its heterogeneity. Owing to the fact that the region encompasses eight different states that have distinct social, political, cultural and economical scenarios, the literature reflects the attempt to assert its uniqueness, so to say an identity of its own. The region keeping aside its cultural richness has also witnessed decades of violence in different states particularly due to the disillusionment and friction between the states and Indian government, issue of migration or the various communal and ethnic conflicts. Easterine Kire is an eminent writer from Nagaland and her works provide a brief blend of history and fiction in their account of various strands of conflicts she witnessed in the personal level hence representing experiences that are unique whereby she attempts to make space for the often silenced. My focus for the paper will be to look at the social and political scenario of the tumultuous time and how the characters actually cope with trauma of myriad forms in the novel. How trauma manifests in the novel and how it impacts the characters' lives and their perception of themselves will be analysed while exploring the applicability of Western Trauma Theory.

Keywords: experience, identity, inferiority, insurgency, othering, trauma, violence,

Introduction:

Easterine Kire is one of the foundational figure from Nagaland, writing in English. She is a poet, novelist, short story writer and translator. To her credit she has novels like, A Naga Village Remembered, When the River Sleeps, A Terrible Matriarchy, Bitterwormwood and Life On Hold and various essays written by her which relatively questions the various ways women are still subordinated she also talks about the function of writing as an exercise in catharsis. Her writings are mostly centered on the Naga Society, as she attempts to present the lived reality of her people with the changing time. Belonging from a state torn in violence and disillusionment she in her life time witnessed the region undergo conflicts of various kinds ranging from war, insurgency, ethnic conflicts, modernization, colonization and much more. Having an insider view give her works a more authentic representation of the lived reality of the people while also giving the readers the opportunity to understand and expand their understanding of the region as well as the dynamics of Trauma which changes with time and society.

Historical Background and Trauma Theory :

Trauma, the term itself has a negative connotation which is usually believed to cause a disruption in the normal functioning of the mind. It is seen as a strike against the psyche or the normal bodily function which results in the creation of an interrupted identity, as Cathy Caruth puts in “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and The Possibility of History” as, “An overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (181).

By Trauma in the writings of North-East I refer to the representation of mental as well as physiological experiences of trauma as trauma literature attempts to look at the correlation between the actual experience of trauma and its representation in fiction. The novel The Story of Felanee and Bitterwormwood deals with different types of trauma hence it becomes necessary to situate it within the scope of trauma theory as the experiences of the characters in the novel while in some instances ascribe to the Eurocentric definition of Trauma, it highlights the need to actually expand its perspective as the experiences of Non- Westerns are often said to have been overlooked or sidelined which further reiterate the need to explore such texts from the peripheries for the purpose of expanding the understanding of such phenomenon that is inclusive. In this regard Stef Craps in his introduction

to Post Colonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bonds talks of the loopholes in the theories put forth by the dominant literary figures:

They fail on at least four counts: they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favor or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma and they generally disregard the connection between metropolitan and non-western or minority trauma. As a result of all of this, rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma theory risk in assisting the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities (Craps).

Keeping aside conflicting claims that comes from different approaches to Trauma theory one led by Hartman is appealing as it looks at the effective role of narrativisation of traumatic experiences as providing a form of relief . This claim appear appropriate as most of the writers writing about loss and traumatic experiences resort to writing as providing two purpose, first a catharsis and the opportunity to voice the experiences of the people whose voices never reach the limelight.

Nagaland and Assam the two States of North-East India apart from being a home to people from varied ground is also home to different conflicts that if compared will not appear any less catastrophic than the various conflicts that took place in other parts of the world. Although the intensity of the violence during Holocaust or Partition in figures may appear more than the conflict that took place in Assam or Nagaland, each state have a story to tell of its own. In Nagaland the prolonged presence of AFSPA , the fight for Independence with the mainland, the emergence of various faction within the insurgent groups and fight for boundaries with various ethnic conflicts bring to light various issues that needs to be probe beyond the surface level as it reflects various unsettled questions that have culminated in myriad forms. The emergence of the insurgents group initially was as a result of disillusionment and hostile treatment the state attained from the centre after the Britishers left India and forced to become a member of India. This was followed by the AFSPA , that exercised limitless atrocities on the ordinary people . All these unsaid experience of the people is what Kire attempts to represent in her writings.

Keeping this aside another reason behind the increasing animosity between the people was driven by xenophobia as it was observed that the native population feared the loss of their place, identity and culture at the hands of the alien settlers. And instances where Xenophobia creates an atmosphere of hostility is something history bear witness to. When Nagaland attained independence from the British rule under the leadership of Angami Zapu Phizo on 14 August, 1947, the declaration emphasized on the creation of an independent Naga state. The next few decades saw the formation of various underground groups like Naga Federal Government and The Naga Federal Army. In response to such uprising the Government of India enacted the Armed Forces (special power) Act in 1958, which gives the armed force the power to maintain peace and order in 'disturbed areas'. What followed was decades of conflict between the armed forces and insurgent groups, ethnic conflicts and the fight to maintain normalcy. As in the case any catastrophic event the worst sufferers were the ordinary people, as such the trauma that emerge from such events are often something that tends to be persistent. While it causes disruption of identity it is said to form a certain bond between the survivors, hence the formation of an identity based on shared experience.

Colonial influence, Insurgency and ethnic conflict are some of the many issues that dominates the history of the state. The ways in which the events unfolded with colonialism coming to an end, followed by the looming presence of insurgency have undoubtedly made its mark in the way the people perceived themselves as well as those with whom they coexisted. Traumatic experiences are often said to alter the ways a person perceives the world and oneself. This is vividly reflected in the instances of violence that was witnessed in the State.

Textual Analysis:

The novel *Bitterwormwood* came out in the year 2011, it traces the journey of the protagonist Moses from the time of his childhood to the time his grandson started entering a world different from his. Having as its backdrop the Naga's struggle for independence, it captures the various endless conflicts that followed after India attained Independence and Nagaland faced disillusionment at the hands of mainland India. It also brings to light the changes that grasp the community as a result of the various prolonged violence in the state. Holocaust trauma studies engage with a definite period of history, and a clear sense of victims, perpetrators, and responsibility. In Rothberg's word early trauma theory presupposes, "the completed past of a singular event-while Colonial and Post Colonial traumas persist into the present(230). The novel *Bitterwormwood* came out in the year 2011, it traces the journey of the

protagonist Moses from the time of his childhood to the time his grandson started entering a world different from his. In this context the novel *Bitterwormwood* adequately highlight the limitations of early trauma theory. With the Naga struggle for independence, Easterine Kire traces the traumatic experience of violence and fight for survival through the eyes of the protagonist Mose, who himself witnessed genocide, starvation, raping of women and burning of village which ultimately led him to join the underground army at a very young age. After being disillusioned with war, fight for independence he ultimately retires. But he suffers more as a retired underground as he bear witness to the killing of his people by the army as well as the deteriorating moral value of the naga society caused by faction killing. We also find the elements of the transfer of trauma to the next generation in the character of Neibuo and how it affects his ability to form meaningful relationships with others. The novel also throws light on the prevalent racial issue that exist in mainland India. Collective Trauma shows how extreme situation like conflicts, brutality reveal about human vulnerability. This shared vulnerability crosses time and space as we come across different generation of people undergo various kind of experience that limits them from going beyond their belief and safe boundaries. In this regard Kai Erikson talks of Collective Trauma and how it function and differs from Individual Trauma:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively...by collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it. (Erikson 460)

In the novel individual traumatic experience is something each character undergoes, Mose as well as other characters have witnessed the loss of atleast one near or dear ones at the hands of the brutality of the armed forces or the faction killing that emerged within the underground party that initially fought for the cause of the Naga people. The constant surveillance that the people witnessed alongside the constant beating of the common people under the assumptions of their involvement with the extremist is something each individual go through. Mose, here can be seen as living a life in constant fear, although after being disillusioned with the underground party and his subsequent departure from the group, he is not left alone by the army as well as the faction party and he is constantly haunted even when he wanted to have a stable life. He ultimately lost his life at the hands of one such

individual while trying to save a life. Neilhounuo, who like Moses joined the extremist party even after years was unable to move beyond the fear of getting on a plane as she witnessed one burst into flames during the Second World War.

Collective trauma is played out in the novel in a lucid way with the introduction of the character of Neibuo, the grandson of Mose's. Although he doesn't experience or witness the killing of his fellow men we find him undergoing the effects of trauma. His experience in mainland India throw light on the issue of being different and treated as inferior. Collective trauma just like individual trauma have the potential to disrupt the ability of a person to situate oneself and thereby fails to form an identity. It creates heightened distrust, individual and collective fear and also humiliation at the social level on the second and third generation of survivors as we see in Neibuo:

"I know that. I am Indian on paper because when I fill up a form and they ask for my nationality, I have to write Indian. But many of my Northeastern friends believe that they are ethnically Indians, and when they meet this kind of treatment, they are so traumatised by it. It's deep-rooted racism and its very ugly. The name-calling, the stereotyping of our girls and the way the police refuse to protect the victim, it just makes me feel very hopeless about the rights we have been promised by the Indian constitution (Kire).

Trauma while it causes disruption in identity and shatters bond with oneself and society at large, trauma also have the potential to form meanings as it reconfigures traumatic experience to form, "new sense of self, belongingness and distinctiveness"(Vignoles). The narrating of the story and experiences between Neibuo and Rakesh here serve the purpose of the re visioning the past memories with a new viewpoint and in the process lead the survivor away from the initial emotion and lead him towards the path of recovery.

Conclusion:

Trauma, in the words of Cathy Caruth form the basic way that connect all the cultures of the world. And the novelist with her humane depiction of trauma that range from the personal to collective have undoubtedly brought out the need to expand the parameter of trauma theory that is more inclusive of the experiences of the people from the periphery who rarely make it to the centre stage. There are various works that still needs an exploration of this aspect of North- Eastern novels as it can expand the understanding of the place and the complex history and promote solidarity which is the primary aim of Trauma studies.

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