SHODHPATRA: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE AND HUMANITIES
E-ISSN: 3048-6041 | Volume- 3, Issue- 4 | April 2026

Reimagining Marginal Voices: A Postcolonial Reading of Veio Pou's Waiting for the Dust to Settle

Semhayi Sapuh[1*], Prof. Nigamananda Das[2]
[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland-797004
[2]Senior Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland-797004

Abstract:

The history of North-East India has often been silenced or relegated to the margins of mainstream cultural and national narratives. Some of the most decisive conflicts and events, such as the Second World War, the Indo-Naga conflicts, insurgency movements, Operation Bluebird, and the Oinam incidents, have largely remained unknown or misunderstood by the rest of the country. These histories have largely been neglected, ignored, or only partially told, and even when documented, they are often narrated by those outside the affected communities, resulting in limited, incomplete, and fragmented representations. Such omissions not only obscure the realities of violence and survival but also shape and distort Naga history, identity, memory, and cultural consciousness. In this context, Veio Pou's *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* reimagines the turbulent decades of the 1980s and 1990s, and seeks to reclaim the suppressed histories by engaging with inherited memories, oral traditions, and intergenerational storytelling. The novel foregrounds the voices of ordinary people, whose lives were deeply affected by prolonged conflict. This paper examines how Pou's work reconstructs history and articulates notions of belonging, identity, and memory by situating the narrative within a postcolonial framework that interrogates power, marginality, and the politics of representation.

Key Words: Postcolonial, Insurgency, Naga, North-East India, History, Operation Bluebird.

1.0 Introduction

Veio Pou belongs to the Naga tribe of North-East India and teaches English Literature at Shaheed Bhagat Singh College, University of Delhi. His debut novel, *Waiting for the Dust to Settle,* was published in 2020 by Speaking Tiger. Pou's writing is largely inspired by the people he has encountered and the stories he heard while growing up in North-East India. For him, writing serves as a mode of storytelling and a means of reliving the memories of those affected by conflict and violence during the Naga insurgency. His work primarily documents the struggle of common people, particularly civilians, who had to navigate the harsh realities of life in the 1980s and 1990s. He believes that writing has the power to transform history by documenting experiences, some of which have otherwise been lost. Community is central to

*Corresponding Author Email: semhayi123@gmail.com
Published: 04 April 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i4.45648
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his work, with each individual character contributing to a larger collective narrative. Having grown up in a very close-knit community, Pou reflects this sensibility in his writing, which remains deeply rooted in the social fabric from which he emerges. He understands the plight of common people and gives voice to marginalized sections of society whose histories, cultures, and identities remain largely unknown to the rest of the country. The title of the novel, *Waiting for the Dust to Settle,* serves as a metaphor for a justice, peace, and solution that remain elusive, yet continue to be awaited with enduring hope.

1.1 Postcolonial Trauma

Postcoloniality is not simply about leaving the past behind—the history, memories, and violence associated with colonialization; it involves a continuous process of remembering and forgetting, of living with the past while at the same time attempting to move forward. As Frantz Fanon (2019) argues, the effects of colonial domination persist in the psyche of the colonized even long after the control have weakened (p. 76). In this context, postcolonial life becomes a space where remembering and forgetting exist side by side, where individuals must constantly negotiate the weight of history while attempting to move forward. Contemporary Naga writer like Veio Pou is deeply aware of what colonialization brought to the Nagas, affecting people across age, gender, and different social classes. Those who lived through that period were forced to carry the psychological, emotional, and physical pains that emerged during the transition from colonial rule to a postcolonial Naga society.

In *Waiting for the Dust to Settle,* Pou presents Rakovei, a ten-year-old boy growing up in a transitional Naga society, to illustrate how common people, especially children, navigate this complex historical moment of colonialization, which seeps into everyday life and continues to shape the inner lives of individuals. Rakovei, like many other Naga children in Manipur, grows up with an awareness of danger while living in the Naga hills of Senapati district of Manipur. His childhood is shaped not only by direct encounters with conflict but also by the fear that surrounds him. Even in moments of ordinary village life, the threat of violence is always present. Being outdoors, playing with friends, or even responding to parents' call carries an underlying sense of risk. Childhood, in this context, is far from carefree. His childhood reflects a broader postcolonial reality in which violence is not confined to battlefields but permeates all spaces, blurring the line between safety and threat.

During the colonial era, children were not always called or brought home at any time of the day for ordinary family activities, but rather out of fear of what the soldiers might do to them upon their arrival in the village. A normal day was not truly normal day for either parents or children. They would rush home whenever they saw the soldiers, fearing what could possibly happen to them. Coloniality effectively shattered the innocence of children in exchange for gunshots and bloodshed. One particular incident that illustrates this occurs when Rakovei and his friends went out to shoot birds with a catapult. Upon their return, they were alarmed by the arrival of soldiers in the village, and a curfew was imposed. Through such moments, Pou shows how children were forced to navigate the colonial era in ways similar to adults, constantly seeking safety and security from those who were meant to offer protect and safeguard them.

1.1.1 Generational Trauma

For many children, the Assam Rifles becomes less a symbol of protection and more an embodiment of fear, punishment, and death. This perception is reinforced within the households as well. For instance, parents would often take the name of soldiers coming to take their children away as a means of discipline. The figure of the soldier enters the child's psyche not as a protector but as a threat. In *Waiting for the Dust to Settle,* the soldiers in their camouflage uniforms become symbols associated with danger, fear, and uncertainty. Postcolonial trauma, in this way, is not experienced in isolation by individuals but is transmitted across generations. It eventually becomes part of everyday language, discipline, and imagination. Postcolonial generational trauma is further evident in Rakovei's mother's own experiences. Pou (2020) When Rakovei tells his mother that he wants to become an army officer when he grows up, her immediate reaction is to suppress his dream: "My father died in the custody of the Indian army. I was just about your age then. But I still vividly remember the day they brought his tortured body home" (p. 51). This moment illustrates the transmission of postcolonial trauma across generations, manifesting as resistance from Rakovei's mother towards her son's ambition. Having witnessed the atrocities of war, bloodshed, and death from a young age, she remains unable to move beyond these memories. Pou (2020) Her childhood experiences shaped her understanding of violence and vengeance; as Pou remarks, she learned "what it meant to hate, and to desire vengeance" (p. 55).

1.2 Shifting Cultures in Postcolonial Society

The presence of Christian missionaries plays a pivotal role in the religious transition of the Naga people. Phymaichi, a village of about ninety households, had long remained untouched by modernity until the emergence of insurgency. With Indians coming into contact with the Naga-inhabited areas of the Senapati district in Manipur during the insurgency, Phymaichi village transformed rapidly in all aspects of village life. We see the divisions among the people not only politically but also religiously. The once-vibrant village, which shared a common faith, identity, and culture, began to disappear under colonial influence. No doubt, Christianity brought greater compassion among the people, but it was not without creating divisions between believers and non-believers. Christian converts were no longer permitted to live in the native village of Phymaichi. As a result of their ostracization, a new village for the Christian was born: Phyabu, a village for the Christian converts. This transformation reflects a deeper colonial logic: while offering the promise of a better life, it simultaneously it disrupted traditional systems of belief and belonging. The creation of a new Christian-convert village signifies not only religious change but also the reorganization of social relations along new ideological lines.

Veio Pou, much like Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart,* did not take sides. Like Achebe, he presents both the positive and negative effects of colonialism and allows the reader to decide the consequences of postcolonial change. Pou (2020) He remarks, "the missionaries were not just preachers of the Word but also educationists and social campaigners. They set up schools that began with proselytization but eventually attracted even more people" (p. 37). Postcolonialism has often been attractive to the colonized, with the promise of a better life through modern education, healthcare facilities, roads, and connectivity, and the Phyabhu

villagers are no exception to these promises. Postcolonialism in Pous's wok is largely intertwined with conversion, education, and the pursuit of a better future. In other words, it functions as a subtle instrument of cultural transformation.

Rakovei's grandparents' conversion to Christianity was not primarily driven by faith, as with many other villagers, but by tragedies—three children died one after the other. Pou (2020) In grandmother's words: "Initially, we did not really understand all that was preached. We were more concerned about averting death in the family. Strangely, our children born after relocating to this new village are well till today… I think many families came to this village to save their children from dying, like us. Whatever it may have been, I'm thankful that we took the decision to move here" (p. 38-39). Moving away from the old village and accepting a new faith thus brought what appeared to be a practical miracle. However, in this context, postcolonial aspect of conversion is not purely spiritual but deeply entangled with survival, fear, and the search for security. It complicates the idea of religious conversion as a purely spiritual and ideological shift, where belief is shaped by urgent need of survival and the fear of loss during the colonial period.

Pou (2020) Veio Pou's mention of Christmas songs played during the festive season highlights the subtle workings of colonial displacement of indigenous cultural practices, particularly through the replacement of traditional songs with Western music: "Boney M, ABBA and Jim Reeves had long remained everyone's favourites. They would all be played in turn" (p. 40). What appears, at first glance, as harmless, can be read as a cultural shift that slowly normalizes Western forms of celebration while rendering indigenous traditions peripheral. At the same time, Pou juxtaposes the grandmother's act of narrating stories to her grandchildren as a symbolic effort to reclaim history, identity, language, and oral traditions. In one instance, Pou adopts the voice of Rakovei's grandmother recounting stories to her grandchildren, emphasizing the impact of colonialism on the cultural consciousness of the youth. The grandmother's stories functions as an archive of collective memory, preserving histories and oral traditions that remain excluded from institutional forms of knowledge.

Pou (2020) The arrival of Western education in the village, along with the employment opportunities, is presented as a double-edged process, often at the cost of abandoning "our songs and stories" (p. 47). Pou (2020) The grandmother's words capture this cultural alienation: "I don't know what they did to them at school. I would never know because I don't speak their tongue. They call it White's man's language… There are not many of my generation left now. When the songs and stories die with me, maybe they will regret it, or maybe they won't" (p. 47). Through this lament, Pou foregrounds the gradual erosion of indigenous cultural knowledge and practices under the influence of modern education. His use of grandmother figure as a storyteller functions as an act of resistance, positioning oral narration as a means of preserving and reclaiming history and cultural identity that are being diminished in the name of modernity.

1.2.1 Loss of Traditional Values

The traditional system of schooling, known as the *morung* system, that is, the separate dormitories for boys and girls of different age groups, had been replaced by the day school

during the colonial era. This marks the beginning of the displacement of the indigenous system of knowledge, replacing oral traditions with formal education. In a small yet significant scene, we find Rakovei, who is brought up during this transition era, taking an active part in the festivities of young boys' and girls' gatherings. Pou's intention in bringing these young boys and girls together in celebration is to mourn the loss of the significance and meaning of the Naga *morung* and the traditional values it once instilled. The gathering becomes a symbolic site of remembrance, where traces of the past linger even as they march toward new ways of life. Rakovei is not merely a young boy filled with the ambition to become an army officer; he embodies Naga history, culture, and identity, all of which are gradually losing their value under the onslaught of colonialism. In many ways, his position reflects a deeper conflict between tradition and modernity. He is someone who has received modern education and speaks the language of the colonizer, yet he cannot fully discard his roots. On every occasion or event, he repeatedly returns to Naga heritage through his participation and engagement with his community. This suggests that colonial transformation is never complete but always contested and negotiated.

1.3 Indo-Naga Conflict

The Indo-Naga conflict in *Waiting for the Dust to Settle* truly begins with the Assam Rifles entry into the village and the establishment of a full-fledged military outpost at Oinam Hill, located on a hilltop that offered a strategic vantage point over many neighboring villages. The choice of such a location signals the extension of state surveillance into everyday village life, where visibility becomes a form of control. Over time, the villagers and the soldiers developed a seemingly cordial relationship: villagers accessed goods at prices cheaper than the market, while the soldiers sought assistance for essential commodities such as vegetables, firewood, and meat. However, the attack on the camp by the NSCN cadres, and the killing of two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs), escalated tensions and disrupted this relationship. The military outpost at Oinam Village was soon closed down and never reopened after the humiliating attack by the NSCN cadres. This incident sets the tone of the novel, marking the genesis of the Indo-Naga conflict. While the actions of the NSCN cadres initiate the immediate crisis, the repercussions extend far beyond the insurgents themselves. The narrative draws attention to how violence in conflict zones often becomes collective in its impact.

Although the NSCN cadres successfully looted a large cache of weapons during the raid of the military outpost, they failed to realize the cost that the Nagas, particularly ordinary civilians, would have to pay for the consequence. The novel subtly foregrounds this disjunction between political action and lived experience, where the burden of insurgency is disproportionately borne by those who are not directly involved. In this context, the Naga civilians become involuntary participants in a conflict they neither control nor fully comprehend. In response to the attack, several counter-operations were launched against the Nagas on the pretext of recovering the lost weapons and ammunition. The Army operations, however, raise questions about the nature of state power, particularly when security measures begin to resemble collective punishment.

1.3.1 Operation Bluebird

Operation Bluebird was launched right after the attack of the Assam Rifles, and for more than three months the villagers in all thirty targeted villages were cordoned off by the Assam Rifles during their search operations. The line between security measures and the suspension of everyday life became increasingly blurred. Under this operation, curfew was imposed, movement was restricted, public transport was stopped, and the villages across the entire region were cut off from the outside world. The ordinary rhythms of life were replaced by a constant sense of surveillance and uncertainty. Moreover, the forces not only wielded power over the people but also punished any civil authority that attempted to enter these villages. The absence of external oversight intensified the vulnerability of the villagers, who were left with little recourse to justice. All of this was imposed on the inhabited Naga region under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). While the act was framed as a legal instrument to maintain order, its implementation in this context reveals how legal frameworks can legitimize exceptional forms control. The law, rather than protecting the interest of citizens, becomes a tool which extraordinary measures are normalized, often at the expenses of civil liberties. Although the villagers and concerned citizens protested against the imposed system, nothing could be done to change the prevailing situation. Their protest remained largely unheard. The Oinam attack left the villagers in a state of hopelessness and despair, as the consequences unfolded before their eye.

A young ten-year old Rakovei, who came to his native village to spend his holidays, was found caught in this despair and witnessed all the atrocities unfold before his eye. He saw elderly people, especially men, including his uncle, taken into custody and beaten on suspicion of withholding the truth. He also witnessed how even a high-ranking official like the Deputy Commissioner (DC) becomes powerless under the AFSPA. For all this time, Rakovei had held a profound sense of admiration for people in uniform and had aspired to become one of them when he grew up. However, this ideal begins to fracture in the face of lived experience, as the same figures of admiration become agents of fear and suffering. That sense of admiration left him upon witnessing the atrocities inflicted by the Assam Rifles on fellow Nagas, particularly the suffering of his uncle at their hands. This marks a deep colonial rupture, where the figure of the state is no longer perceived as protective but as coercive. Rakovei's experience gives way to a more critical understanding of power, identity, and belonging. Pou (2020) In Pou's words: "Ever since the assault on his uncle, Rakovei had nursed an anger that seemed to grow every time he encountered the men in uniform. His dream of becoming an army officer had faded away" (p. 123).

The once lively village, which had little contact with the outside world, has now turned into a space marked by violence, vigilance, and protest. People of all age —young and old, male and female, educated and uneducated—are affected from all sphere of life. The villagers can no longer attend to their fields; students in the village turn to protest against the imposed rules and system; and many of the older youth joined the underground. Pou (2020) The streets, once filled with the sound of nature, are now filled with chants: "'Down with Military Rule', 'Stop Looting the Granaries', 'Stop Killing Innocent People', 'Army Rule, No Thanks', 'We Want Justice', 'Shame, Shame, Operation Blue Bird', 'Stop Torturing Innocent Villagers' and 'Army

Rule = Human Rights Violations'" (p. 123). NH 39, which used to an ordinary road, has become a sight dominated by military convoys, filled with army personnel and vehicles. Everyday life is no longer normal. Notices of bandhs continue to be the most common and visible form of public protest, with no feasible solutions. The narrative captures a broader postcolonial condition, where communities remain caught between resistance and repression, with neither offering a clear path toward stability or justice.

1.3.2 NSCN Spilt and Internal Divisions

Beyond the Indo-Naga conflicts, the novel also depicts internal divisions within the Naga underground during the 1980s, including the formation of the Naga Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in 1980 and the ideological differences among its leaders that led to the split in 1988 into two factions: NSCN-IM, led by Isak Chishi Swu and Th Muivah, and NSCN-K, led by S.S. Khaplang. These historical developments are not presented as distant political events but are woven into the everyday lives of Phymaichi and surrounding villages. The spilt of the NSCN reveals how internal fractures weakened the collective aspirations of the Nagas. The novel also highlights ethnic tensions, particularly between the Naga and Kuki communities, which disrupted a relationship that had existed in relative harmony for generations. The growing bitterness and hostility between the two communities eventually led to violence resulting in the burning of each other's houses. This reveals the outcome of prolonged conflicts in the regions and the gradual reshaping of inter-community relations affecting over time.

The novel thus portrays how insurgency in the Naga Hills during the late 1980s and 1990s brought unrest and bloodshed not only through external forces but also through divisions among Naga groups themselves, as well as between different communities in Manipur. It shows that violence is not limited to external confrontation but is also reproduced within communities themselves. The failure of the system to protect the interests of common Naga people is vividly depicted throughout the narrative. Pou (2020) The author captures the grim reality of communal violence in Manipur during the 1980s is described as: "But the hurt was deep and real, and the earlier relations shared by the two hill communities could not be restored. Though they all professed Christianity, its principle of reconciliation was overshadowed by human stubbornness and the inability or refusal to forgive and forget. Anyone preaching love and reconciliation ended up being scoffed at" (p. 155).

1.4 Conclusion

The deep disillusionment of the Naga people, in general, toward both the Assam Rifles and the underground groups in the post-colonial era can be seen in Pou's *Waiting for the Dust to Settle.* Postcolonialism does not signify the end of wars and conflicts; rather, it reflects the enduring wounds that people must mend while navigating new lives without losing their old values within a change system. For the Nagas, settled in both Manipur and Nagaland, the postcolonial condition often means bearing the continued weight of extortion, bribery, taxation, threats, and the persistent fear of violence—realities that echo the structures of control established during the colonial period. The novel ultimately unsettles any simplistic understanding of postcolonial freedom as liberation from oppression and shows how colonial struggles persist in altered

forms. Pou (2020) The loss of nationalism in postcolonial Naga society is captured in the following lines: “To die at the hands of their own people would be a bigger tragedy. In the past, even ordinary people proudly bore pain and suffering and torture, or die for the cause of the Naga nation, but now they were dying for no reason” (p. 220). Pou (2020) The state of mind of the Nagas in this postcolonial era is reflected in Rakovei, who “wouldn’t stop working and thinking and wondering…living between hope and despair” (p. 222).

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