

# Representation of Gender Reality and Identity-formation of Indigenous Naga Women in Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*

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## Abstract

Gender identity, a socially and culturally constructed embodiment represents a person's experience of gender in a society. The female gender is marginalised at all levels of society and forced to experience multiple troubles in the functions of a pluralistic society. This study attempts to shed light on the experiences of the women of Naga tribe from the North eastern region of India. Nagaland has a troublesome history of war and insurgency which caused miserable sufferings to the tribes. Tragic histories and the silenced voices of women are brought into the limelight by the literary narratives emerging from that region. Easterine Kire portrays the indigenous voices of the Naga women through her writings with emotional vigour and authenticity. This paper attempts to examine the female characters in the novel as depicted by the writer to interpret the traumatic experiences of the indigenous women during the turbulent times of war, induced by the conflicts of power. Nagaland follows the cultural pattern of patriarchal system that situates women and their experiences at the periphery of the society. Further, the factors contributing to the identity formation of Naga women amidst the suffering are highlighted. The study involves textual interpretation of the fictional work *A Respectable Woman* and examines (with the conceptual framework of intersectionality in mind), Kire's construction of women characters who are subjected to suppressions by the external powers as well as their own community.

**Keywords:** Gender; Identity formation; Insurgency and war; Intersectionality; Nagaland.

## Introduction

In the modern context, gender-based discrimination has emerged as a universal problem and attracts serious attention. Gender bias exists as a socie-

tal construct at the social, political, and cultural levels. The two biological sexes of men and women differ from each other in terms of physical characteristics, but the society determines the roles that men and women are expected to play, contributing to gender stereotypes, which have strong socio-cultural implications. Laura Sjoberg rightly states that gender is “often described a social construct, an institutionalized entity or artifact in a social system invented or constructed by a particular society that exists because people agree to behave as if it exists or to follow certain conventional rules” (5). Therefore, in a pluralistic society, gender orientation is a collection of customised rules imposed on the socially weaker groups. Hence, the female group is stereotyped as being weak on both the social and economic fronts as a result of stereotypical gender standards. Women from tribal communities have catastrophic lived experiences because of gender based violence. Indigenous women face double discrimination outside their territories owing to cultural and social patterns that differ from mainstream societies.

The state of Nagaland, located on the North eastern part of India is one of the states which experience difficulties in balancing gender equality. Customarily known for its patriarchal social patterns, the culture of Nagaland constantly posits Naga women at its periphery preventing them from participating in the societal actions and causing enormous difficulties in establishing gender identity. At this point, AdrijaDey opines on the relationship between gender and social identity as follows: “An individual’s social identity has immense influence on their perceptions, understandings and experiences of gender making it fundamental to study gender within the framework of power relations deep-rooted in particular social identities” (4). Hence, gender is an institutionalised entity of promulgating power politics in the diverse society. To elucidate these commonalities prevailing in Nagaland, this research examines Easterine Kire’s portrayal on the elements of gender discrimination and women’s resilience in reconstructing their identities through her literary narrations. Kire’s *A Respectable Woman* is analysed in the light of Kimberle Crenshaw’s ‘intersectionality’ to demonstrate how the social elements of life intersect to subdue the identities of Naga tribal women both within and outside their community. The construction of women characters in the novel are theoretically discussed to understand inequality and the vulnerable circumstances where their identities are deprecated. This paper also studies the literary representation of gender reality of Naga women on one hand and the parallel picture of women resistance against the social odds on the other. Further, women and their horrendous experience induced by the hands of the supremacy during the war times are vividly analysed.

## Theoretical Framework

The term “intersectionality” was coined by civil rights activist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, primarily to discuss the oppression of African-American women. Intersectionality is a feminist theory that draws inspiration from the revolutionary Black Feminism movement and addresses the problems of marginalisation and discrimination of women in pluralistic societies. Intersectionality has since gained recognition as a theoretical framework in the humanities field to explicate the socially constructed praxis of “gender” in all of its multitudinal dimensions. Intersectionality is a form of nonverbal communication used to oppress weaker groups by politicising gender. The collision of class, color, sex, gender, religion, nationality, and other factors alludes to an intersection that denigrates a person’s social or personal identity at some point. At this juncture, Crenshaw opines that she has:

. . . used intersectionality to describe or frame various relationships between race and gender. I have used intersectionality as a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy generally. I have also used intersectionality to describe the location of women of color both within overlapping systems of subordination and at the margins of feminism and antiracism. (1265)

According to Crenshaw, when viewed through the intersectionality lens, women’s relationships with the ruling class are insecure and vulnerable in various ways because they are constrained by the overlap of socially constructed categories such as race, class, gender, etc. Diverse components interlock together to form the “matrix of domination” (Patricia Hill Collins 18), which is used to marginalise and victimise women. The contours of intersectional aspects reflect how the substance of gender and structural hierarchy actually exist in the world. Through literary narratives, this study employs intersectionality as a research paradigm to comprehend the agonising confrontations and plights of Naga tribal women to represent the gender reality in Nagaland.

### Literary Representation of Gender Reality and Identity Formation of Naga Women

The politically invented term “Northeast” region in India is primarily riddled with its turbulent bloodshed, war, violence and insurgency. The region covers the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Sikkim. All these states prac-

tice their traditional customs of rich ethnicity but are collectively observed as conflict prone zones by the outsiders. The colonial and post-colonial era has always been troublesome to the tribes as their indigenous livelihood was recurrently interrupted by the political interventions. The entry of British and Japanese forces to occupy the territory is the root cause of demographical and political frictions in Northeast India. The battle of Kohima which is bitterly known as the "forgotten battle" (Easterine Kire *Mari* 12) has its established significance in the historiography of the nation. The experiences and the consequences of Khonoma war, the battle of Kohima and the insurgency have left terrible scars on the psyche of the victims which can still be seen today.

The history of Nagaland lays bare the vulnerability of the tragic past rooted in insurgency and violence thereby making devastating impact on the tribal identities. The events and the experiences of Naga tribes are set aside by mainstream society on all platforms. In the broader context of gender, "Historically, most traditions project men as 'warrior', 'provider', 'leader', etc. whereas women are labeled as 'domestic', 'maternal/nurse', 'follower', etc." (Veio Pou 160). Similarly, in Nagaland tribal women are hardly established as powerful agencies because of the patriarchal pattern followed in the Naga society. In order to weed out this existing primordial assumption, a large number of emerging women writers document the voices of the victims to bring out the lived realities of Naga women. In an attempt to understand the prevalence of the theme of violence in the works from the region, Tilotoma Misra in her work rightly points that:

Violence features as a recurrent theme because the story of violence seems to be never ending one in this region and yet people have not learnt to live with it . . . writers across the states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura are deeply concerned with about the brutalization of the societies by the daily experience of human right violation and the maiming of the psyche of a whole people by the trauma caused by violence. (xix)

Therefore, literature plays a significant role in expressing the suppressed voices of the impoverished tribes. Easterine Kire is an eminent writer, who struggles continuously for the inclusivity of the tribes into the "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson 24) of the country. She explores the negligence and the social exclusion experienced by the Nagas in her literary works with a conscious blend of fiction and reality. Kire, in her novel *A Respectable Woman*, picturises the sufferings of Naga women during the insurgency and discusses the reality of women's status in the patriarchal

Naga society. The Nagas adhere to patriarchal social standards and a system of customary rules developed in accordance with their tribal way of life, where men are expected to dominate women and restrict them to larger extent. Naga women are expected to take care of domestic duties and household matters, whereas men are seen as significant social figures. As a consequence of this gender bias, “indigenous Naga woman is twice subjugated: by the patriarchal social system on the one hand, and on the other, by the stringent tribal laws and customs that restrict her participation in larger social activities by limiting her resources and opportunities.” (I Watitula Longkumer 8). As a result, men play a prominent part in rewriting the nation’s history while indigenous women are completely excluded.

*A Respectable Woman* is a female centric memory novel where the narrator Kevinuo shares the memory of her mother Khonuo on the terrible history of Nagaland during the colonial and the post colonial era. The story continues through the female narrations and highlights the community’s treatment of Naga women as subjugated and voiceless owing to gender in terms of economic, cultural and social spheres with numerous intersectional factors that force the weaker group to the margins. Their struggles during the war time are frequently underrepresented. In the novel, Kevinuo says “It took my mother, Khonuo, nearly forty years before she could bring herself to talk about the war.” (Easterine Kire 3). The prolonged silence on war represents the suppressed state of the victim’s psyche in remembering and retelling the tragic past. The political chaos in Nagaland contributed to the imposition of double oppression on Naga women based on their race and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw clearly states that “In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class” (Crenshaw 1242).

The war narratives of Khonuo exemplifies that the confrontations experienced by the women during the conflicts are terrible, deadly and left them in isolation on most situations. In the context of war and conflict, women are the passive victims of gender based violence, particularly rape, in most cases. When Khonuo says, “We heard that women were raped in . . . villages” (Easterine Kire 58), it reveals how both the external forces and rebels from their own community treated the Naga women like objects of desire and always resorted to physical abuse to assert and impose their authority. K. B. Veio Pou, in his book *Literary Cultures of India’s Northeast* states that “Sexual violence against women in war and conflict has been

seen as one of the biggest crimes against humanity. It is not just a humiliation of the community but violates an individual's rights to live with dignity. Yet, time and again, "rape" has been used a weapon in war" (189). Moreover, most of the sexual violence took place in front of their family members, and most of the time, the victims were killed. During the war and insurgency, Naga women were seen as the weakest weapons by those who wished to demonstrate their dominance over them. In this scenario, Naga women were subjected to vulnerability thereby, unable to resist the brutalities imposed over them. Therefore, Pamela DeLargy observes that:

... the belief that women are lesser than and should be subordinate to men leads men to feel entitled to rape women. Additionally, the patriarchal view of women as men's property underwrites the notion that rape is simply part of the legitimate bounty of war: the winners would be seen as entitled to take their opponents' women, just as they would loot other property. (61)

The constructed gender principle defines and differentiates between the weak and the strong in the society, with respect to varied contexts. In the case of conflicts in Nagaland, it is always the women who constitute the weaker section. Besides, Naga women are consistently placed at the receiving end of physical or sexual violence induced by the men from other communities and their own community which project them as vulnerable and in turn contributes to the failure in establishing their individual identity. Naga women's predicaments are vast as they:

suffer as civilians with their freedoms curtailed and shackled. They are assaulted, beaten, humiliated, raped and murdered during conflicts. The loss that women face in times of conflict is not just emotional, or physical in terms of losing a loved one, but also transfers into the economic and social spheres. (Preeti Gill 215)

The consequences of gender-based violence against Naga women don't just harm their physical attributes; rather, the horrifying incidents traumatise their psyches, leaving them with long-lasting scars. In the words of a Psychiatrist "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder . . . develops following a psychologically traumatic event that is generally outside the range of usual human experience which most normal people would find overwhelming" (P. Ngully). Accordingly, the legacies of Naga women are endowed with traumatic disorders as a result of encountering brutal war and violence. The power to dominate through the intersectional facets has the signifi-

cance of the historical background as Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix define: “the concept of ‘intersectionality’ as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts” (76). Therefore, these diverse social factors of the Naga community, being unable to stand as individual entities, intersect to oppress women at all levels of the society.

In the novel, Kevinuo is portrayed as a revolutionary Naga woman, who voices out for the equal socio-political and cultural rights of her women community. She questions the age-old Naga cultural system of patriarchy that discerns women as mere properties. This is illustrated through the life story of the narrator’s friend Beinuo whose life was shattered by the acts of her husband Meselhou who is obsessed with the stringent Naga customary practice as he “called Beinuo his property” (Easterine Kire 147-148) . He is a man who “pestered her [Beinuo] to marry him and did not give up until she said yes.” (Easterine Kire 148). This is because “Men like Meselhou have their own interpretation of our customary laws and act accordingly” (Easterine Kire 147-148) to maintain the pristine practice of their community which adversely eliminates women from celebrating their Naga citizenship. This is because of the existing social and cultural systems of patriarchy in Nagaland endorsing the biased ideology of men in treating their counterparts. This is the case with Meselhou, who has “found a perfect victim [Beinuo]” (Easterine Kire 147- 148) who uncomplainingly suffers his supremacy. The practice of male autocracy is exemplified through Meselhou, who forces her to give birth to a male child as an heir to his family. Accordingly, when Beinuo delivered a new born, “[h]e is not happy that the baby is a girl” (Easterine Kire 123). This attitude of Meselhou emphasises the gender bias prevailing in Naga society. Beinuo is a traditional Naga woman who accepts and fails to resist against the injustices inflicted on her by her husband. This receptivity of Beinuo is criticised as follows:

The opposition to such a vision of Naga society is mind-boggling and two-pronged: the obvious opposition will be from men; but equally strong would be the opposition from a section of women who are themselves still traditionalists at heart and would like to continue in the state of ‘benevolent subordination’ rather than be involved in a struggle to reform the mind-set of men so strongly entrenched in their age-old belief in male superiority.  
(Temsula Ao)

The incapability of resisting the gender inequality pertaining to Naga society is a sign of obliging to the benevolent subordination under men. The Naga society has constructed an ideology that a woman can be socially respectable only if she marries and performs the obligations set forth by the tribal customary system. The society never bothers about the suffering she has to endure in order to perform her duties. This is a sign of cultural suppression of women within the ethnic community and they are left to suffer by their own men, irrespective of their social responsibilities. When Kevinuo ventures to interfere in the domestic frictions between Beinuo and Meselhou, Beinuo responds as: "No no, you mustn't do that. Please, Kevinuo, promise me you won't. I will sort this out. We will sort it out. It's our problem. I'm a married woman now." (Easterine Kire 123). The last phrase that she is a married woman demonstrates that she has to endure all the sufferings and agonies in solitude without complaining. Thus, marriage becomes one of the rudimentary loopholes for the men from the patriarchal society to subjugate their counterparts to unendurable gender discrimination. Furthermore, there are certain parameters within which the Naga women are restricted and persecuted from confronting communal injustices. The patriarchal injustices imparted on the Naga women are legalised within the community as Crenshaw rightly expounds that the "efforts to stem the politicization of domestic violence are often grounded in attempts to maintain the integrity of the community" (1253).

In this respect, politicising the traditional practices is deliberately rejected by the Nagas whereas, with diverse facets of subjugation, women become the sufferers at the end. To exemplify the transgression committed against the Naga women, Kevinuo interrogates the complex cultural system as "what's wrong with our culture that it can allow this kind of behaviour? Why should we follow a culture that allows a man to be so cruel to his wife?" (Easterine Kire 148). She blames the traditional practices of the culture that abandoned the equal rights of tribal women. In a diverse culture, a person's social relationships are altered by their cultural patterns, which can either empower or delimit them. In the same way, the patriarchal set up of Naga society restricts the legal rights of its women in the mainstream society. Kevinuo says "we should find ways of reforming cultural practices so we can ensure justice for those who are truly in need of it" (Easterine Kire 149). As an educated Naga woman, she criticises the primordial pattern of Naga customs that provide asymmetrical attribution of social and cultural rights to men and women. Domestic intersectionality in Naga community diversifies the dynamics of gender bias that consequently collapses the identity of Naga women at larger forum. Therefore, as Subadra Panchanadeswaran and Catherine Koverola mark that the violence com-

mitted against women “needs to be placed in the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal . . . cultural context of India marked by unequal gender relations that are rooted in centuries old religious scriptures” (737). Kevinuo, through her intellectual ideology of resistance to the patriarchal system, redefines the peculiarities of a respectable woman in the pluralistic society irrespective of the social and cultural odds.

Therefore, Kevinuo is portrayed as a woman who established her self-identity in a serious manner which is disabled from many uneducated Naga women in general. Whereas, Beninuo is a typical tribal woman who struggles under Nagaland’s cultural and social systems to build her own identity. Thus, education here becomes one of the primary social influences that help in voicing out for women’s rights and assembling their identity formation notwithstanding the hegemonic intersection of class, race, sex, gender, etc. Though the culture of Naga is a collective formation, it is in the hands of the individual male members of the community who hold the responsibility in reconstructing the identities of their counterparts amidst the intersectional facets that expedite to subjugation and oppression. The metaphorical representations of Beinuo, a traditional Naga woman, and Kevinuo, a modern Naga woman, show the paradox between accepting and resisting the social constraints of the patriarchal Naga society. In order to set revolution in motion against the prejudiced social and cultural systems of the Naga practices, the self of women has to be strengthened with the spirit of prerogative instincts to embody robust identity formation.

## Conclusion

As Pou in his essay recounts, “They [Naga Women] do not fight with the physical might but with the might of the pen, the intellectual prowess” (Pou162), Easterine Kire through her literary oeuvre endorses the reputation of Naga women and their lineages. Gender reality of Nagaland as expounded by Kire’s literary articulation in the novel *A Respectable Woman* explicitly recalls the excruciating experiences under the hierarchal supremacy representing the ostracised situation of voiceless Naga women. She exteriorises the lived realities of Naga women within the domestic and social space under hegemonic potentiality. The traumatised psyche of Khonuo, who revisits the tragic past of Naga history is deeply essential as Pou says, “The trauma that women undergo during conflicts can best be told by women because women experience war and conflict differently from men” (Pou162). The narrations clearly outline the elements of intersectionality such as race, class and gender that help in dissecting

the individual identity of Naga women in multiple aspects of the society. However, the author also introduces the central character Kevinuo who condemns the patriarchal Naga culture and attempts to re-establish the Naga women identity to secure a respectable and indistinguishable position irrespective of gender discrepancies. Nevertheless,

The socially constructed self of the woman in the past was so thoroughly subordinated to the male that in time she too accepted it as the definition of her ontological selfhood. Despite appearances, Naga society is still very traditional in its outlook and one of the abiding truths of this society is the 'position' of woman in the public domain. (Temsula Ao)

The characteristics of the women and self are often determined by the external forces, which in turn proliferate the illusioned identity of Naga women in the global arena. The contours of political dominion of the past and domestic intersectionality faced by the Naga women limit the possibilities of establishing their space in the present context. When compared to mainland society, the participation of Naga women in the composite culture is very much less owing to their historical and cultural orientations. Women like Kevinuo are articulating this in larger forum to redefine their assumed identity of vulnerability in cultural, social and political strands. To conclude, notwithstanding the matrix of intersectional notions of gender, race, class, religion and nation, regional writers like Easterine Kire, reconstitute the primordial identities of Naga women by maintaining the integrity of the Naga cultural systems. The replicas of identity formation of Naga women help in establishing their national collective identity, despite their socially constructed gendered interventions.

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