



DIFFERING RESISTANCES: CONSIDERING THE NAGA STRUGGLE AND THE FEMALE SELF IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY* AND *A RESPECTABLE WOMAN*.

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Abstract: The complex structure of Northeast India presents an idea of Nationalism marked with a tense and contested ground of political claims and counter-claims. This has resulted to the volatile and often conflicted socio-political matrix of the region. Easterine Kire's selected novels namely, *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *A Respectable Woman* narrates the turbulent years of bloodshed and chaos that mark the history of the Nagas from the early 1950s. This paper attempts to read Kire's novels as poignant narratives about the collective trauma of the Naga people caught in the column of nationalistic uprising and whose pain has far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged. The paper argues that in times of political crisis and social disruptions, it is the women who become the worst victims and endure displacement, violence and rape. Kire also depicts how women have suffered physical and psychological traumas yet do not stop depicting women as mere victims. The paper, thus, engages itself in examining victimhood, the courage and resilience of Naga women by which they project female will and resistance in their own ways, when the very humanity of the Nagas is assaulted and violated.

Keywords: Naga Nationalism, Gender, Resistance, History, Postcolonialism.

1. Resistance Writings in Nagaland:

Literature plays a vital role in revealing an individual's resistance against the hegemony through his/her writing. It focuses on the study of literature in obtaining civil and human rights, throwing of hegemony and active reconstruction of interpreted histories. It is born out of social injustice and political marginalization. The complex structure of Northeast India presents an idea of Nationalism marked with a tense and contested ground of political claims and counter-claims. This has resulted to the volatile and often conflicted socio-political matrix of the region. In the postcolonial-postmodern milieu, the mounting political turmoil raises tension between the Northeastern states and the central government, between the local people and the immigrants that destroy growth and development and fuel the already volatile atmosphere. Northeast women have also witnessed devastation in their lives physically, mentally, psychologically, which greatly shape their socio-political and economic status. Women get doubly victimized in this type of situations; in being treated as their male counterparts and being devastated by terror itself. Mostly for poor tribal background, with remote access to basic civilities of life like education and healthcare facilities, Northeast women are suppressed and delimited to their rights. Thus, the issues of women, not only the deprivation but also the violation of rights, require immediate intervention and redress.

The conflict situation since the 1950s has been tough for the Naga Society. Both men and women have suffered untold miseries, but since most narratives have been written by men, women's perspective to the whole situation has not been heard hereby the "invisibility of women" in history altogether (Pou, 162). Women's active involvement in resistance has also become a significant aspect of writings in various forms against oppression, thereby shaping a feminist voice in the liberation struggles. The trauma that women undergo during conflicts can best be told by women because women experience war and conflict differently from men. Stories like *Child of Fortune* by Nini Lungalang, *The Last Song* by Temsula Ao, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari* and *A Respectable Woman* by Easterine Kire are examples of considering the Naga struggles and female struggles during troubled years of the Indo-Naga conflict. The paper argues that in times of political crisis and social disruptions, it is the women who become the worst victims and endure displacement, violence and rape.

2. Kire as a writer:

Easterine Kire is a famed Naga poet, storyteller and a novelist whose works are rooted deeply in Naga society. She has to her credit a number of poetry collections, *Kelhoukevira*, *The Windhover Collection*, *Jazzpoetry* and other poems. She is also best known for her novels and short stories. Her fictional works, *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Life on Hold* (2011), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Forest Song* (2011), *Once in a Faraway Dorg* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014) and *A Respectable Woman* (2019), are a realistic read on Naga society that transcendently witnessed large scale changes in cultural, social, religious and political arena. She is also a recipient of several awards and Literary Prizes for her works.

As a writer, Kire takes incidents and facts from the lives of her people and weaves them into stories which are like documents and chronicles of the marginalized voice of the Nagas. She brings the past alive through her novels allowing readers to come to a nuanced understanding of the complex social, tribal and political world of the Nagas. In her poetry, short stories, folk tales and novels, she articulates the voices which have remained silent and unknown, those stories and identities have been misrepresented or misinterpreted through bias, ignorance, discrimination and stereotyping. In articulating the socio-cultural, historical and political realities of her people, Kire speaks too for the Naga woman, a politically and historically silenced group. She talks about the predicament of Naga women whose voices, muted for centuries, finds representation in her famous novels such as *A Naga Village Remembered*, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari* and *A Respectable Woman* which present differing images of women whose lives are defined and circumscribed by power structures in a traditional tribal society operating within its cultural and social ethos.

Literature may be resistant in the psychoanalytic sense, which Rose describes as: "For Freud... resistance was a psychic reality that blocked the passage of the psyche into freedom. On the mind's best defences, it cuts subjects off from the pain and mess of the inner life" (Rose, 5). Not all literature is subversive, and Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *A Respectable Woman* are examples of that. It is the inner world of the protagonists', that shows an unrelenting resistance to the "pain and mess" of the political realities in which it inheres. Both the novels are saturated in a woman's world, where the protagonists are trapped; the Naga political world is almost completely denied entry through the dense gendering of its world. Therefore, the resistance is not just the blocking of the pain of the public violence of the Naga context; it is also a resistance to an exploration of the private pain wreaked upon the protagonists in the context of the family. In both spaces men are let off the hook and women are held responsible. Kire not only resists engaging with the Naga political text but also resists an engagement with the female self.

3. Differing Resistance: Considering the Naga Struggle and the Female Self in *A Terrible Matriarchy* and *A Respectable Woman*:

A Terrible Matriarchy portrays the Indo-Naga conflict and expresses the early stages of conflict between the Indian government and the Naga freedom fighters that borders on futility. It portrays the anger and frustration at the human rights abuses on Naga people by the Indian Government. As Kire remarks in the preface of the novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*, the problems portrayed in the story is drawn from her real life experiences. She says, "After the 1950s, frustration over the political suppression of Naga rights by the Indian government led many men to abuse alcohol. Unemployment added to the frustration which many tried to deaden with drink. Alcoholism has other causes in the Naga situation, yet all are interrelated to the political climate of the state and the increasing sense of social and economic impotence". (Kire,viii). Kire touches upon this issue through Vini's drunken outburst against the Army and the fake encounters: "Do you want to know why I drink? Why all of us drink and brawl? It's because life here in Kohima is so meaningless....Do you know how frustrating it is to be a Naga and live with the fear of being shot all the time? Do you know what it does to your insides when you hear about the people tortured and killed by the army and you can't do anything about it?" (Kire, 226). The frustration and feeling of helplessness but still not wanting to yield to the enemy is an important aspect of Naga's resistance for an authentic identity.

The novel basically has been studied mostly as gendered tensions between a grandmother and a granddaughter. However, from a postcolonial perspective, Grandmother Vibano is trying to hold on to the past and that defines their people. Franz Fanon's key concept of postcolonial criticism in finding a voice and an identity for the colonized people is to reclaim their past as "the past is revered" (Fanon, 150). Thus, Vibano expresses, "In our day...girls did not go to school...I really do not approve of girls getting educated. It only makes them get fancy notions about themselves and they forget their place in the family" (Kire, 23). This also expresses the older generation's fear that western education alienates a girl or a woman from her duties towards her family. Her refusal to use electricity in her house also presents another resistance to conform or to accept the colonizer's way of life. Therefore, there is the fear in the minds of the older people as their children gets further dislocated from the tribal community and integrate into the colonialists' world resulting to fight fiercely against the colonialist' rule.

The Battle of Kohima has left many people in tears and pain. Easterine Kire presents the changing Kohima after the battle which is presented through the life of Dielieno's mother. For her, life was divided into two phases, before the war and after the war and, life, in her opinion had always been better before the war. She had been a very young girl then, loved dearly by her parents and getting educated at the Mission School. When her mother died in 1943, rumors of war were all over the town and villages. She had heard her father's friend report that Japanese spies had come into the southern villages. Most of the boys in her class joined the army or went to work as cook's helpers in the army camps and the Government school soon closed down. After the closing down of schools, Lieno's mother confined herself in the kitchen looking after her siblings. During war and communal riots, women were abused and raped because of their weakness in their strength. It is also Lieno's mother who was abused by a German spy as he came into the kitchen and pulled her into his arms and tried to molest her. Lieno's mother though escaped from him was shaken by the incident.

The economic condition of the people before the war was prominent. Starvation had never hit the villages and the villages never knew what hunger was because they worked very hard and so, they never ran short of food. It was only when the Japanese moved into the town and villages that people found what starvation was. "Terrified of the Japanese soldiers, the local people fled to the fields and field huts" (Kire, 172). Their houses were then occupied by the Japanese soldiers. Kohima was 'unrecognizable' after the war. The war of Kohima is one such event which can never be forgotten that brought nothing but destruction and hatred.

Kire's *A Respectable Woman* (2019) is the latest novel which solely focuses on having an identity of one's own. She divides the narrative into two broad sections – told through the stories of Khonuo, who was ten years old when the Japanese invaded Kohima and her daughter Kevinuo who is the novel's narrator. At first, the reader is taken through the memories of Khonuo, called as Azou (mother), recounted to her daughter in fragments nearly 44 years after the war, piecing together the aftermath of the destruction and the rebuilding of homes and lives. When the novel reaches the birth of the narrator, the focus shifts to Kevinuo and her journey from childhood to adulthood in a changed Nagaland, amid growing modernity and youthful aspirations. The novel brings to light a society which is trying to cope with change while struggling to hold onto its traditions. It recounts through historical fiction, the twentieth century life of the proud Kohima, Nagaland.

As Khonuo narrates about the past, the people would scramble to get their lives back to normal. They would rebuild their homes and begin the cycle of school and field going. She further narrates the post war Kohima, about the people in the past who were more broad-minded, more tolerant, more understanding and less quick to judge than they are today. They have seen the devastations of war and “people who know what it's like to lose everything almost overnight, homes, loved ones, and life” (Kire, 37) during the war. Kire also projects the picture of death as imminent when Vilhoulie, the drunkard dies due to ‘cirrhosis of the liver’ resulting from acute alcoholism. He was a good singer and a regular church goer with his wife but he became frustrated in life when his wife met a tragic death while childbirth. When drunk and roaming around in the street, he appears to be “the most terrifying one” (Kire, 87). Alcohol abuse became a visible social problem in Nagaland during the post-war Kohima. Thus, the result of war in the end was a “strange time” where they saw some people doing the meanest things and some people doing the noblest actions.

4. Results and Discussion:

The idea of a ‘Nation’ has been considered as one of the strongest force of resistance to imperial control in colonial societies. It is a concept of a shared community which enabled postcolonial control in colonial societies to invent a self image through which they could use to liberate themselves from colonial powers. In the case of the Nagas, the idea of a nation began with the arrival of colonizers on their land. In *A Respectable Woman* when some of Amo's friends became soldiers and fought in Burma against the Japanese, some dead bodies did not reach their families and some who survived returned with missing limbs. Many of the Nagas had not known any government other than the British, therefore, Kire evokes a similar sense of abandonment felt by many Nagas upon the final departure of the administrators: “The village people were saying, ‘Our parents are leaving us’. It was said with sadness and a sense of helplessness” (Kire, 57). When the British mapped and divided the land between Burma and India, the Nagas organized protests against the action and refused to join the Indian union resulting to the establishment of the Naga National Council in 1946. The rise of Nationalism and revolution against the colonizers has become a part of their identity. It arose out of their need to preserve their tribal traditions which is threatened by the arrival of the colonizers.

The brutality faced by the villagers became dangerous and they were no longer safe in their own houses. As Khonuo narrates to her daughter, she had tears in her eyes when talked about the sufferings of the people. Civilians were killed, women were raped, people whose family members were in the Naga army were harassed by the soldiers and sent to prison until they surrender. The armies also imposed curfews and spontaneous firing in the middle of the night. Therefore, many men joined the Naga army to fight against the Indian Government. Kire asserts, “It was a nationalism that went very deep; it was difficult for men to stay away from the struggle. Even women joined the underground and fought alongside the men for many years” (Kire, 61-62). This paper, thus, attempts to read Kire's novels as poignant narratives about the collective trauma of the Naga people caught in the column of nationalistic uprising and whose pain has far gone unmentioned and unacknowledged.

Kire recounts women as victims of the traditional society through the portrayal of women like Beinuo in the novel. Beinuo is the best friend of the protagonist who falls under the category of gender abuse. When she was married to Meselhou, a reserved man from a well qualified background, she paved way for her lost of freedom as an independent woman. She became anxious to please her in-laws and it made Kevinuo sad to see that “the vibrant girl I had known seemed to have disappeared altogether and another person had taken her place” (Kire, 121). In the past when they discussed about marriage life, Kevinuo asked Beinuo what she would do if her husband beat her, Beinuo would beat her husband right back as “ He has no right to beat me, I won't let him”(Kire, 106). This statement becomes ironical in the present Beinuo's life. She becomes the victim of her own choice, Meselhou. She falls under the category of ‘wife beating’ victims as her husband continuously beat her up for no reason. Gender inequality also prevailed in the novel when the girl child Melhouvino (Uvi) was born to them. Meselhou did not visit his wife and newly born daughter whom he expects to be a boy child. Out of frustration, he beat up Beinuo and later on when a boy child was born only to be dead; Meselhou pushes her down the steps and beats his wife to dead. She was treated as the ‘negative’ and the ‘other’ and her tragic death defines outcome of the dark patriarchal society.

Both the novels provide an insight into these struggles, the disadvantages women suffer and struggle with a predicament which is the result of their historical, sexual and gendered subordination. Different women each in a different kind of situation, reflects the predicament she is caught in. No woman is free from the invisible chains of male dominance which is a way of life. In presenting the breaking point between tradition and modernity flowing in Naga society, we see society changing but attitudes not changing along with it. We see women desiring opportunities for education, for a place or standing in her family or society, for improvement of her lot but patriarchal attitudes which have not advanced with the times appear to obstruct a woman's quest for self-improvement, independence and individual identity.

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. Thus Naga women no matter how well-educated or highly placed in society, suffer from remnants of the psychological trauma of subordination which in the past might have seem perfectly logical but which now appears to be a paradox within the “modern educated self”(Ao,51) . By and large, the Naga woman does enjoy some personal freedom, whether married or single, when compared to her counterparts in other societies of the country. What she has accepted through the centuries as her assigned’ role in society is now being put to the test on account of the transition of a totally rural, agrarian society into a modern, urban one where the priorities are varied and comprehensively different.

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