

# Mapping the Journey from Margin to Center: A Study of Easterine Kire's *a Respectable Woman*

**Dr. TAMISHRA SWAIN**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English and MELs  
Banasthali Vidyapith*

**Dr. APARNA**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English and MELs  
Banasthali Vidyapith*

## Abstract

*This paper tries to unravel the cultural complexities of Nagaland with specific reference to the text a respectable woman by Eastrine Kire. This particular text is regarded as a memory novel where the main character recollects the destruction and reconstruction of a Naga village during and after Kohima war and the story then gradually moves towards the contemporary culture of Nagaland and the challenges it faces. This paper specifically tries to analyze the secondary position of women in Nagaland through the predicament of the characters in the text and their struggle to bring themselves to the centre by showing resistance to the dominating authoritative discourses.*

**Keywords:** *memory novel, feminism, hegemony, discourse, North East literature*

## Introduction

North-East Indian literature is a less explored area may be for its geographical and linguistic differences as compared to the Indian mainland. However, recently we can observe major dominating voices from the eight sister states of North East India in the form of writers like Nabakanta Barua, Robin S'Ngangom, Nilamani Phukan, Mona Zote, Anjum Hassan, Ankush Saikia, Atul Chandra Hazarika, Hem Chandra Goswami, Mamang Dai, Rong Bong Terang Mitra Phukan, Laxmi Nath Barua Patricia Mukhim, Gadul Singh Lama, Tamsola Ao, Easterine Kire, Hijam Anganghal Singh, Beni Chandra Zamatia etc. Similarly, literature from Nagaland is no exception. It is not well known until recently when the readers started reading writers write in English and represent their culture, landscape, and society in it. The writings of Easterine Kire, Tamsola Ao, Nini Lungalang, Monalisa Charkikija etc. are important in bringing the Naga literature to the literary forefront.

Naga literature exists for long time but its presence was not visible in mainstream literature the reason being it is majorly oral and was transmitted from generation to generation orally. If anything was written or documented that was in their own native language that made it difficult

for others to read and understand. Nagaland was introduced to English education in the 1970s and then the translation of their literature was possible. Before the indigenous people translate their own literature a bulk of literature was already translated by the Britishers. In a sense, the Naga literature was initially translated by foreigners and then the native people retrieved and translated their own literature for the global readers. Only when it is translated into English it gets its wider readers. Tilotama Misra observes that during the early years, the literature that was developing in different Naga languages "bore the recognizable stamp of the style, imagery and diction of the Bible" being directly influenced by the Christian Missionaries (2011: xxii). Story-telling and narrating folk-poems are often employed by the writers from Nagaland who make a conscious effort to re-create folklores and folk songs. Re-tracing their traditional roots becomes an important identity marker. As rightly pointed by Veio Pou "Kire the stories she constructs powerfully captivate the readers with her style of narration which is deep-rooted in the storytelling tradition of the Nagas. Even in this novel, her effort to reconstruct the memory of the past is in the true spirit of the Naga oral culture wherein

there is a conscious passing down of stories of the people to the younger generation”(63). The adoption of the language and blending of folk elements has become the Naga writer’s distinctive quality.

### **Easterine Kire: An Introduction**

Easterine Kire a poet, writer, and novelist in English was born in 1959 in Kohima the capital city of Nagaland. She holds a Ph.D. in English literature. She worked as a lecturer in English at Kohima College and then served at Nagaland University before shifting to Norway. She currently lives in Northern Norway where she concentrates on her writings. Kire’s works majorly discuss the Naga culture, its history, and contemporary socio-political issues. Her major fictional works include ‘*A Naga Village Remembered*’, ‘*A Terrible Matriarchy*’, ‘*Mari, Bitter Wormwood*’, ‘*Forest Song*’, ‘*When the River Sleeps*’, ‘*A respectable Woman*’ etc. She has also received awards and accolades for her literary contribution to Naga Literature.

### **Summary of the Text**

The novel *a respectable woman* is more like autobiographical writing than a novel, as it narrates the experiences and observations of the narrator, Khovinuo. The novel is initially devoted to the experiences of Khonuo, the mother of the narrator who witnessed the Kohima war and the devastation during that time. There is a long silence about this incident before she speaks about her trauma to her daughter. In April 1944 the Japanese finally entered Kohima and the people were asked to evacuate the town and take shelter in the nearby villages of Kigwema, Chieswema, Ruzoma, Tsiekhou etc. With the constant bombing and fire Kohima was “ablaze and covered with thick black smoke”, and it was soon evacuated (Kire 2010,56).

This narration also discusses the rebuilding of Nagaland after the war. These minute details give the text a realistic touch. The narration parallels the personal with the socio-political issues of that time. Khonuo in *a respectable woman*, remembered the time of postwar political happenings, when the Indian army came to Kohima, bringing death and destruction, which created an atmosphere of fear and resentment. The whole community

was caught between the two forces of the Indian army and the Naga underground army: “Every now and then, the even tenor of life would be interrupted by a killing- sudden gunfire in encounters between the army and the underground which sent people scampering for home and destroyed any semblance of normal life in an instant. But the next morning, the townspeople would pick up their lives and get back into the routine of daily lives”(Kire, 2019,63). With the birth of the narrator, the story too travels from the past to the present which discusses the Nagaland culture, social issues, the challenges it faces after independence, the rise of insurgency etc. Apart from these issues it also discusses important social problems like the wayward youth who involve themselves in alcohol and through the character vilhoulie this problem is presented. The traditional ideology too is presented especially about the secondary position of women and how the women are expected to behave in a certain way. The character Beinuo who got married into an abusive relationship is another important episode in this text. The concluding part of the text is devoted to the ultimate resistance to the problem faced by the women. It is more about personal battles for getting justice. This text is interwoven with memories of the elders who witnessed past and present as well as see the growth and challenges faced by Nagaland.

### **Kohima War: A Brief Background**

The text is written against the backdrop of the Kohima war, the battle of Kohima took place in three stages from 4 April to 22 June 1944 around the town of Kohima, Nagaland in northeast India. In the first phase, the Japanese attempted to capture Kohima ridge, then in the next phase British and Indian reinforcements counter-attacked to drive away from the Japanese army. Then the British and Indian troops reopened the road. The battle ended on 22 June. After the Kohima war, Nagaland witnessed various socio-political changes. “The battle of Kohima is important both historically and geographically as, after the war, Nagaland has seen unprecedented changes in socio-cultural and political interfaces followed by the independence of both India and Burma, separation from Assam, the statehood of Nagaland in 1963, the rise of national consciousness pioneered by A Z Phizo, implementation of AFSPA, and prolonged counter-insurgency” (Sarkar, Gaur 10).

### Journey of Women from Margin to Center

The position of women has always been secondary since time immemorial, may it be Western or Eastern culture. They are always denied equal rights. In the west, the first wave of feminism began with demanding voting rights for women, and later the second and third waves of feminism advanced with further demands for gender equality which the women were denied for a longer period of time. Hence, during the first wave Mary Wollstonecraft in her book "Vindication of Rights of Women (1792)..." challenges the idea of male dominance and propagate the idea of education which the women were deprived of. Similarly, other feminist theorists like Eline Showalter, Virginia Woolf, Simon De Beauvoir etc supported the idea of women's rights and sensitized the women about their subversive position in the male-dominated society through their writings. While Western feminism opened the door for women to progress to raise consciousness about women's individual problems, feminists in India too are striving for gender equality. If we look back and compare the situation of India then and now, we can see gradually the condition of women improved. However, when we compare the condition of mainland India's women with those of North-East Indian women there are differences in their struggle and predicament. Nagaland consists of various tribes with different dialects. Tribal culture is not infected with social problems like child marriage, dowry system, child labour etc unlike Mainland India. Easterine Kire in her interview accepted the fact by saying, "There are many things in Naga society that are liberal and positive; education for children regardless of gender, encouragement of girls taking up professions or studies formerly dominated by boys, a healthy acceptance of non-conventional roles and professions". (389) Hence, there is a common perception that Naga women are more empowered as compared to their mainland counterparts. But if one studied deeply the condition of women in Nagaland one can realize the secondary position of these women, especially in the political arena and ofcourse to some extent in the social order as well, as rightly said by an independent scholar of Nagaland, "The Naga customary laws protected and upheld by the Indian constitution's Article 371A has worked both to the advantage and disadvantage of Naga society...

Article 371 A has also led to discrimination in many areas, particularly against women. For example, women are least likely to be given leadership privileges and are therefore excluded from decision-making bodies. Discrimination also arises in inheritance and property ownership." (Vamuzo). Similarly, according to another Naga scholar Vitso (2003) "houses, lands, fields are always inherited by males whether rich or poor...Immovable properties if inherited by women would belong to others"(6). These issues are aptly described in Naga women writers like Tamsola Ao, Easterni Kire etc. Kire narrates the subversive practices present in Nagaland through her book *a respectable woman*.

In the text *a respectable woman*, Kire narrates realistically the patriarchal ideology of the Naga people. Patriarchy is not necessarily followed by men only but women too strongly believed in these ideologies as natural. When Kevinuo was young one of her relatives Atsa Nisou said, "...how to raise a child, especially if it was female"(72). The narrator in her young days heard such types of discourses in her family, from her relatives, from school teachers etc. who give much importance to marriage, husband, family in a girl's life, how a girl should behave in society to be respectable etc. Kevinuo was shocked in school when she witnessed the plight of an eighteen years old girl who got pregnant without marriage and was expelled from social and religious gathering as she was no more a respectable woman. In a sense, the educational institutions, religious places, and one's own society are the tools to subjugate and control the woman to act in a certain way in the society. Kevinuo also heard her mother saying in another context that "once she is married, we consider her to be her husband's property"(103). Instead of safeguarding a woman from an abusive husband, the ladies accepted domestic violence as normal, as if a woman is an object for a man, a property to be possessed. These discourses are very common and shape the young minds to believe these subversive ideologies as natural. In her book *Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir rightly said, 'woman is not born but becomes one' (301), which means sex is natural whereas gender is cultural. The concept of woman is cultural, while furthering this idea Judith Butler said about "performativity" where she

says by performing an act continuously one can create one's own identity. So, gender according to her is 'performative'. "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo"(520). Does that mean women accept their own marginalization by performing certain functions regularly, in a sense yes, according to Foucault it is the discourse that controls the identity, and discourse is normally created by the powerful, and here the power may it be physical or material lies with men and hence discourse is created by men and disseminated to 'the other', through certain tools like politics, law, education, culture, rituals, societal norms, religion etc. As Althusser said about interpellation, through various ways these discourses are disseminated to the people in such a way that they accept it as natural and perform their roles according to that without questioning the significance.

However, *In The History of Sexuality* Volume One, Foucault states that "where there is power there is resistance"(95). Resistance does not mean opposing someone by any violent means or by applying any coercion. But there are various ways one can show the resistance by foiling the dominating discourse. In this text the protagonist, Kevinuo is seen as a non-conformist who throws a challenge to the society in her own way by not getting married even if she is teased by many, and she is the one who for the first time raised her voice against the domestic violence against women "I'm going to the police to get him arrested"(143). She threatened Beinuo's husband Meselhou by saying "You won't get away with this. You murdered her!"(143). Later she shows her solidarity with all the women by adopting Beinuo's daughter Uvi. The text ends with a sarcastic dialogue from Kevinuo the narrator that "I am 35 years old now, a registered spinster. My chances of becoming a part of respectable society through marriage are very slim, or are they? My rich, old widower has not shown up yet. We still have a little laugh about that, saying he will finally come hobbling with his walking stick apologizing for the lateness"(161). Kevinuo liberates herself by creating a different life of being a spinster, a single mother which serves as a counter-narrative to the age-old convention of the society.

## Conclusion

If we survey literature, we see that women are never represented truthfully as most of the literature is produced by men, hence, women are always represented through the lens of men. Unless women write for themselves it is really difficult to portray a truthful picture of women in writings. Surveying Naga literature one can see the dominating presence of women writers in the contemporary age and the women characters being represented through the eyes of women. A parallel discourse is to be recreated through the womenwriters. Naga writers like Easterine Kire and Tamsola Ao write about their people's trauma and represent woman's voices which were silenced for a long time in male-dominated society. Hence, created a parallel narrative, a story of their own with a different ending.

## References

1. Baral, Kailash C, "Articulating Marginality : Emerging Literatures from North East India" in *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity*. Edited by Margaret Ch Zama, Sage Publications India, 2013.
2. Butler, Judith. "Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory." *Theatre Journal* Vol.40, No.4, 1988, pp. 519-53.
3. Foucault, Michel. *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley Vintage 95, 1990.
4. Kire, Easterine. *Mari*. Harper Collins, 2010.
5. Kire, Easterine. *A Respectable Woman*. Zubaan, 2019.
6. Longkumer, I Watitula, *Naga Women's Perspectives on Gender Roles: An Analysis of Literary Narratives*. Zubaan, 2019.
7. Longkumer, I. Watitula, and Nirmala Menon. "Return of the Spirits: An Interview with Easterine Kire." *English: Journal of the English Association*, Vol 68, No 263, 2019, pp. 389-399.
8. Misra, Tilottoma. *The oxford Anthology of Writings from North East India*. OUP, 2011.
9. Pou, Veio KB. "Memories Remain". *The Book Review*, Vol 44, No2-3, February-March, 2020. P.63

10. Sarkar, Ivy Roy, and Rashmi Gaur. "Memory Novels as Lieux De Mémoire: Reading Cultural Memory in Easterine Kire's *Mari* and A Respectable woman." *Interventions*, 2021 1-17.
  11. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
  12. Vamuzo, Meneno, "Narratives of Peace: Naga Women in the Self Determination Struggle", *In Tensions*, Issue 6, 2012, York University (Toronto, Canada).
  13. Vitso, Adino, *Customary Law and Women: The Chakhesang Nagas*. Regency Publications, 2003.
- [https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Vamuzo\\_-\\_Narrative\\_of\\_Peace-\\_Naga\\_W\\_in\\_the\\_Self\\_Determination\\_Struggle\\_0.pdf](https://genderandsecurity.org/sites/default/files/Vamuzo_-_Narrative_of_Peace-_Naga_W_in_the_Self_Determination_Struggle_0.pdf)  
(Date of accession 1 February 2022)