

Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman*: A Feminist Study

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Women's position since time immemorial has been secondary, whether in Western or Eastern culture. Women are not only pushed to the margin in the cultural, social, or economic sphere but also in the literary sphere. With growing awareness, women asked for equal rights in every sphere of life, whether in political, social or cultural spaces. Considering the condition in the literary sphere, one can see how women's voices are never raised, or even if raised, they are never heard. However, by writing about their own experiences, women can represent themselves in a more accurate way, make their presence felt and challenge the mainstream writings mostly written by men. This paper tries to analyse Easterine Kire's *A Respectable Woman* from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Subaltern, subjugation, gender, discourse, ideology

Feminism

The term 'Feminism' is not a unitary concept, so it is difficult to give its fixed definition. However, in order to define feminism, Lisa S. Price, in *Feminism Frameworks: Building Theory on Violence against Women* (2009), says, "Feminism is a method of analysis, a standpoint, a way of looking at the world from the perspective of women. It questions government policies, popular culture, ways of doing and being and asks how women's lives are affected by these ideological and institutional practices" (p. 6). Similarly, Pramod K Nayar, in his book entitled *Contemporary Literary and Cultural*

Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism (2009), opines that “Feminism in its historical trajectory, has examined the nature of language- which excludes women, or forces them to write and think in a language over which they have no control” (p. 131). Arpita Mukhopadhyay rightly said in her book *Feminisms* (2016) that “Feminisms address the issue of women's inferior position in society and seek ways and methods of alleviating the social-cultural, political and economic discriminations that women are subjected to” (p. 1).

Hence, many theorists provide multiple definitions of feminism. Chaman Nahal, in his article “Feminism in English Fiction” (1991), defines feminism as “a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome, whether it is the husband or the father or the community or a religious or ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises” (p. 20).

The major idea behind the concept of feminism is that, for ages, women have been pushed to a secondary position by patriarchal social discourses. Social tradition only keeps women under control. It is apt to quote Simone de Beauvoir, who firmly believed that: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” (1975, p. 34) In order to establish their own identity, women have to break themselves from the patriarchal ideologies that they internalised and which are handed down to them from generation to generation.

The history of the modern Western feminist movement, as suggested by Maggie Humm, is divided into three “waves”. All three feminist waves deal with different aspects of the same feminist issues. As it is rightly said, “The origin of feminism as a movement is diverse, depending on specific oppressive practices across time

and space. While women have offered resistance against exploitative practices for centuries, feminism is a concerted political movement” (2016, p. 2).

In the first wave of the feminist movement, women asked for equal and legal rights. An important book written during this time by Mary Wollstonecraft entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) is the precursor for such suffragette movements. In this book, she advocated for equal social and moral rights for women. The second wave feminist movement roughly started in the 1960s and addressed issues such as women’s employment, role in the family, sexuality, and political rights. There are some major writings produced and influenced by the second wave: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949; Elaine Showalter’s *The Literature of their Own*, published in 1977; and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, published in 1969. The third-wave feminist movement was a continuation and reaction to the second-wave feminism. This movement addresses the issues of differences of women according to race, nation, ethnicity, etc. The female sufferings cannot be accommodated into one category as the sufferings are different in different cultural and geographical spaces. For example, the Western feminism propagated by the first and second wave does not accommodate the experiences of black females, third-world females, etc. “Any attempt towards putting feminism into neat little categories is doomed to fail since feminism is not monolithic.” (2016, p. 11). Similarly, literary scholars believe that the fourth wave of feminism, which started roughly around 2010, is associated with technology like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social networking. Campaigns like “Every Sexism Project” and “Me Too movement” are associated with it.

Naga Literature

There are many different ethnic groups in Nagaland, each with its own language, culture, identity, and way of life. The area

is viewed as peripheral and distinct from the rest of the nation and is widely regarded as a homogeneous entity. There has been a lot of unrest in the area, including political unrest, cultural upheaval, religious unrest, and issues relating to natural resources. Due to the lack of knowledge about Nagaland, it is geographically as well as psychologically distant. However, with the efforts of various authors, the region is now becoming an area of research interest. Bhagat Oinam and Dhiren A. Sadokpam (2018) in *Northeast India: A Reader* writes: “In recent times, the region is no more ‘a strange or a distant land’ to the average educated Indians. From a state of tabula rasa, Northeast India has now become a mosaic of multiple impressions. However, it is to be noted that many of these impressions are hinged on stereotypical imageries.” (p. 1). Various non-fictional authors, such as Sanjoy Hazarika and Sanjib Baruah, highlight the problems of the region. The fiction writers of the region Tilottoma Misra, Indira Goswami, Mitra Phukan, Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, Sumita Ghose, and Mamang Dai intend to portray a holistic image of the region and the people.

Retracing the traditional roots is one of the important identity markers for the Naga community. So, story-telling and narrating folk poems are often employed by the writers from Nagaland. As rightly pointed out by Veio Pou, Kire's stories “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” (2020, p. 63). The adoption of the language and blending of folk elements has become the Naga writer’s distinctive quality. North-East Indian literature is vibrant and multidimensional, incorporating themes of borders, boundaries, identity, locations of home and culture, and oral tradition. These themes are often indigenous in nature and exclusively discuss

community-specific indigenous knowledge and ethics. In one of her interviews, Kire said:

We writers from North-East India have to struggle for visibility much more than writers from other formerly colonised countries. It is because mainstream Indian publishers and festival organisers either try to subsume us under Indian writing or ignore our presence, which happened in the 1990s. Now that many North-East Indian writers are beginning to be internationally recognised, they can no longer do that. In fact, North-East India is trending, and many big publishing houses are eager to pick up North-East Indian writers. Becoming part of the mainstream Indian canon might have the advantage of getting more readers. But I don't believe that. We are too different to blend into the body of Indian mainstream writing smoothly. North-East Indian writing will always stick out. So, it's a good thing to be seen as different because we are different, and we have different literary experiences to offer. Of course, many areas we write about are similar and universal because we are writing about human experiences, but there is something that is uniquely North-East in the flavour of our writing. (2019, p. 7)

Easterine Kire: An Introduction

Dr Easterine Kire was born in 1959 in Kohima, in the Angami Naga family of Nagaland. She studied in Shillong and later did her PhD at Savitribai Phule Pune University. *Kelhoukevira* is the very first book of poems in English by Kire. The 2003 *A Naga Village Remembered* was another landmark: the first novel from Nagaland. This book was a historical novel describing the resistance of Khonoma against British troops. It was the first Naga novel to appear in English and received the Hindu Prize. Later on, she published novels like *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), followed by *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormwood* (2011), *Don't Run, My Love* (2017) and *Walking*

the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland (2019). Her latest book, *Spirit Nights*, was published in 2022. She has also written children's books, articles and essays. Watitula Longkumer narrated, "Kire writes in English and is the author of several books, including poetry and short stories. Kire's creative works specifically address the Naga indigenous community to which she belongs and deploy its social, cultural, and political narratives as backdrops to her stories." (2019, p.1) Kire faced lots of opposition from the government for her fearless comments on the Nagaland political situation. However, she moved to Norway long back in the year 2005.

Easterine Kire's works inculcate a sense of cultural identity and historical consciousness about Nagaland. Her works include poetry collections, folktales, short stories, children's books, and novels. In *Sky Is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), she inculcates deeper into the battle of Khonoma, which took place between the British and the Nagas. Along with the battle, detailed cultural intricacies and the love for Mother Nature in Nagas, especially the Angamis, have been depicted marvellously. In *Mari* (2010), she recollects the horrific battle between the Japanese army and the British army during World War II. She narrates the story through the diary of her aunt Mari, who was a witness to the war. She explained the effects of war on Kohima and the aftereffects of the war on the minds of the people. *Bitter Wormwood* (2011) is a story of two friends reminiscing about the old days when they fought over a decade for Naga Independence. The political scenario, violence, racism, and extremism are well portrayed in the novel. The novel traces the degradation of the Naga society caused by factional killings and political unrest. *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013) covers three generations of women. The rigid and discriminating behaviour of Grandmother Vibano towards Delieno is shown. Grandmother is a symbol of the transference of patriarchal rules and norms, which she wants to inculcate in her granddaughter. She wants her to be a

docile, meek, and obedient Naga wife. Son of the Thundercloud (2016) revolves around a myth of the son of the Thundercloud who takes birth to avenge his father's death. The plot is short and interesting. The novel is full of supernatural aspects of Naga culture and their closeness to nature. The novel includes themes like myth, magic, supernaturalism, magic realism and innate Naga wisdom. In a sense, Easterine Kire highlights Naga consciousness and Naga identity by using memory.

Summary of the text

A Respectable Woman (2019) is the story of war and loss. The novel describes the Japanese invasion of Kohima during World War 2 and how it affected the scenario and the state. The novel revolves around the bitter memories of the war and the transformation of the victims. The novel showcases Angami Nagas and covers the early years of the protagonist, Kevinuo, who lives in Nagaland, where modernity and development are taking place. The novel is narrated from the perspective of Khunuo, the narrator's mother, who was ten years old when the invasion took place. The novel shows the evil in society after the battle, implying a focus on alcoholism, young deaths, and intolerance in people.

A Respectable Woman is a bildungsroman novel that discusses post-war Kohima involving Angami women of two generations with different world views. Similar to the novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), this book is a memory novel based on the clash between the British and Nagas in the 19th century, set during the Japanese invasion of Kohima during World War II and the post-war years. The whole narration of *A Respectable Woman* was told by Kevinuo, who narrated the stories she heard from her mother, Khonuo, who was ten years old at the time of the Japanese invasion of Kohima. Initially, the readers come across the memories of Khonuo's fragmentary history of war before 44 years. She recounts

to her daughter the devastation of the war, the displaced family, and the rebuilding of the homes and lives of the Kohima people. Later, the narration changes towards contemporary Nagaland and its problems, including social, cultural and political.

After the war, Kire writes about Azuo and her sister being reluctant to join the school. For girls like these, the missionaries came up with a plan to teach them how to bake cake, how to pray and how to speak English. In short, these girls are taught how to be respectable with the English language, etiquette, manners, etc. It also makes the reader understand the relationship between British administrators and Naga tribes. After Independence, the missionaries left India. When the last missionary family leaves India, Kire writes, "Reverend Supplee was a musician who had written songs on Kohima which were sung by different generations of Nagas in later years. Ruth Supplee, the missionary's wife, was frequently sick and would spend days confined to her bed. Many people were sad to see them go" (Kire, p. 23). She 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, p. 23). Kire also discusses the conflicts and atrocities of the Indian Army. Kire also demonstrates with great insight how lives go on – from weddings to funerals – even in the middle of a crisis. It is a testimony to human resilience and, at other times, resignation in the absence of better alternatives to appreciate the little things that have been the story of several pockets of the North East at various points in history.

In the second half of the book, the narrator draws the reader's attention to the contemporary issues of Nagaland. One of the issues is how alcoholism creates a major problem for youth. Kire masterfully writes about how the Nagaland Liquor Total Prohibition Act 1989 came into place, weaving in the challenges that alcohol-related violence places on Kevinuo's oldest friendship and an eventual

life-changing decision. Kire also discusses insurgency movements by indigenous groups.

Women's Marginal Voices

A *Respectable Woman* narrates the battle of Kohima, which took place in 1944 in Nagaland. The drastic social and political changes were very evident in Nagaland. Through their written representation, various feminist theorists such as Elaine Showalter, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, etc., uplifted the thought and idea of women's rights and made women realise their secondary position in society, whereas men control society by taking the primary position. These Western feminist theorists raise women's consciousness and their problems. In India, feminist writers and theorists strive for gender equality, which includes fighting for equality in pay, equality in the political sphere, and equality in the sphere of education and health. They have also highlighted how the patriarchal Indian society strangles women and forces them to conform to the patriarchal mindset.

As time passes, the condition of women in India has improved gradually in mainland India, but if we shift our focus towards the women of Northeast India, we can see them struggling for their rights, and they are unable to voice their opinions. There are various tribes in Nagaland, each having their own dialects. The tribal culture of the Nagas does not consist of problems such as the dowry system, child marriage, etc. Due to the lack of these social problems, in comparison to the women of mainland India, the Naga women are freer and more empowered. But as one dwells deeper into the Naga society, it is clear that the Naga women are marginal. They are marginalised in the social order and in the political sphere as well. These issues of marginalisation of Women have been addressed aptly by Easterine Kire in her novel *A Respectable Woman*. Kire articulates in an interview that “There are many things in Naga society that are liberal and positive; education for children regardless of gender,

encouragement of girls taking up professionals or studies formerly dominated by boys, a healthy acceptance of non-conventional roles and professionals” (Kire, 2019, p. 389).

In the novel, Kire represents a raw image of the Naga society and how the patriarchal order is maintained in Nagaland, including customary laws and inheritance. She gives various household examples to which one can easily relate and understand. To her surprise, not only men but women also contribute to maintaining the patriarchal order in society, and according to them, it is normal.

From her early years, the narrator has seen and heard various things, which made her feel the secondary position of women in the household as well as the society. The discussions and conversations in her family, at school, in public areas, etc., gave much prominence to having a husband, getting married, and starting a family. The discussions also include a girl's social and moral code of conduct, instructions and restrictions regarding her behaviour in society. Kevinuo was appalled when she witnessed that an eighteen-year-old girl got pregnant and was terminated from school and from social and religious gatherings as well. She was not seen as A Respectable Woman anymore. Institutions, such as society, religion and educational places, therefore, work as controlling tools to subjugate women.

Kevinuo’s mother once said, “Once she is married, we consider her to be her husband's property” (Kire, 2019, p. 103). The ladies accept domestic violence instead of helping and safeguarding women from this abuse. They accept it as something normal and acceptable and consider a woman to be her husband's property. These women have seen similar patterns in their households and believe in the same ideologies. These examples and instances from daily activities justify what Simon de Beauvoir mentioned in her book *The Second Sex: "Woman is not born but becomes one"* (p. 301). Born as female sex, but after the implication of social and cultural oppositions, she

becomes a gendered subject and a woman. Culture imposes the performative aspects on a woman, what Judith Butler explains about "performativity" and how it influences one's identity. According to Bulter, "Gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (1990, p. 25).

According to Foucault, the discourse controls the identity. Discourse is created by power. Powerful people and positions; power may be mental or physical; hence, the discourse created by men dominates the discourse; therefore, they control identity. Identity is controlled by the tools of dominance such as culture, education, law, politics, religion, rituals, etc. These tools create what Althusser calls 'interpellation' in one's identity, which makes the masses believe that the interpellated form is a natural way and one must not question the performance of their respective roles in society.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, p. 95). Resistance is not always expressed through violence and opposition. In the text, Kevinuo is a non-conformist and challenges society by standing firmly on her ground, negating the institution of marriage. She raised her voice against domestic violence against women and took a stand against Beinuo's husband and threatened him: "You won't get away with this. You murdered her!" (Kire, 2019, p. 143). Later in the novel, she shows another example of bravery and non-conformity by adopting Beinuo's daughter Uvi. The ending of the novel leaves a sarcastic dialogue from the narrator: "I am 35 years old now, a registered spinster. My chances of becoming a part of a 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 apologising for the lateness" (p. 161). She frees herself and creates a counter-narrative for society by creating a life for herself by being a single mother and a spinster. Her strong

decisions and boldness of character intimidate society and make her an inspiration for more Naga women to stand up for the evils in society and make a difference by empowering themselves.

Conclusion

Kevinuo is presented as a docile, meek, obedient Angami girl at the beginning of the novel, and later, one can see her growth as a mature person. After graduation, she started working at a school in Kohima. Seeing the situation of married women around her, she rejected the institution of marriage and aspired to lead an unmarried life. Kire represents marriage as a chain for women that strangles around a woman and takes away her freedom, happiness, opinions, and desires. Through the protagonist of the novel, Kire portrays the image of an Angami woman who refuses to conform to the traditional notions set for a woman. She adopts her friend's daughter Uvi and sets an example that a woman can successfully bring up a child outside of marriage. The book sets an example of how education liberates women and makes them empowered and stand firm in their opinions and decisions.

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