

A Postcolonial Analysis of Easterine Kire's a Respectable Woman: Dehumanization, Societal Upheaval, and Cultural Blending

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Abstract: Nagaland has endured terrible hardships due to a troubled past of rebellion and warfare. Literary narratives emerging from that region highlight tragic histories and the marginalized voices, especially of women. Easterine Kire writes with emotional vigor and authenticity to represent these indigenous voices. Through the lens of colonial oppression, dehumanization is examined revealing how characters in the novel are stripped of their humanity, agency, and cultural identity by colonial forces. Their tales highlight the severe pain that indigenous people have endured by reflecting the systematic violence and marginalization. Another recurring subject is societal instability, which highlights how conventional institutions and ideals became unstable under colonial authority. As characters like the protagonist Kevinuo, move between colonial and indigenous cultures, navigating their identities and allegiances in a volatile colonial context, cultural mixing emerges as a complicated phenomenon inside the story. The novel illustrates the difficulties of creating a sense of identity in a postcolonial environment and the conflict between conserving cultural legacy and assimilating elements of colonial culture. The research being conducted aims to further develop *A Respectable Woman* as a rich examination of the enduring consequences of colonialism on indigenous communities, as well as to enhance understanding of the agency and resilience of marginalized voices in the face of historical trauma and cultural suppression.

Keywords: Cultural blending, dehumanization, identity conflict, societal upheaval, war

Introduction

Easterine Kire, one of the most prominent voices from Northeast India, is a unique individual whose artwork highlights the struggles faced by the native tribes, as well as their culture, customs, and values, giving the reader an intimate look at the many stages of Nagaland's evolution. The Naga people's voice against various forms of tyranny is becoming more audible during this process. Vehemently denouncing any gender bias in her portrayal, Kire states, "*I don't like certain books of mine being labeled feminist literature. They are not. I am concerned about human rights of both genders, not just women, but any human being discriminated against and being badly treated.*" (Pou)

In Nagaland, there are numerous ethnic groups, each with its dialect, identity, culture, and lifestyle. The region is generally accepted as a homogeneous entity and is seen as regional and separate from the rest of the country. The region has seen great turmoil, including problems with natural resources, political unrest, cultural upheaval, and religious conflict. Both geographically and mentally, Nagaland is remote because of the lack of awareness about it. However, because of the work of several writers, the subject is now receiving attention from researchers. One of the key components of the Naga community's identity is retracing their traditional roots. Accordingly, Naga poets commonly use storytelling and recounting folk poetry. As Veio Pou rightly pointed out, Kire's works "*powerfully captivates 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*" (Pou 63).

In her book, Kire employs storytelling techniques to inform readers about Kohima's situation during and after colonialism. Colorful and diverse, North-East Indian literature delves into topics related to boundaries, restrictions, personal identity, cultural hubs, and oral history.

Through her work, Kire questions popular narratives that frequently exclude or silence indigenous voices. She offers a critical viewpoint on the interaction of gender and ethnicity in postcolonial Nagaland by focusing on the experiences of Naga women. Her characters' life tales highlight larger social concerns and highlight the importance of giving indigenous identities and experiences more respect and attention.

Objective

This research investigates the self-perception of native communities in Northeast India within a colonial context as depicted in Easterine Kire's book, while also examining their resistance to colonial dominance. By exploring these themes, the study seeks to understand how marginalized groups construct their identities and oppose injustice. Additionally, it examines Kire's portrayal of the dehumanization of Naga women within Nagaland's colonial and post-colonial history, analyzing the social upheavals and their impact on gender roles and women's status in Naga society. The research also delves into the theme of cultural blending, exploring how Naga women reconcile their identities amid traditional and modern influences.

Research Methodology

To complete the research paper, the author has employed a qualitative research methodology with an inductive approach to literature, utilizing literary analysis as the primary method to explore themes and narratives in *A Respectable Woman*. The research includes an extensive review of literature on Easterine Kire's works, examining scholarly articles, books, and critical essays related to the socio-political history of Nagaland, gender studies, and cultural studies. Key themes such as dehumanization, social upheaval, and cultural blending are identified and analyzed through a close reading of the text.

Dehumanization

The terrible past of Nagaland, which was based on bloodshed and insurgency, is exposed by its history, which has a catastrophic effect on the indigenous identity.

"Historically, most traditions project men as 'warrior', 'provider', 'leader', etc. whereas women are labeled as 'domestic', 'maternal/nurse', 'follower', etc." (Pou 160).

Similar to this, because the Naga civilization adheres to a patriarchal structure, tribal women of Nagaland are rarely formed as powerful agencies. A growing number of female writers are documenting victim voices to highlight the lived reality of Naga women to challenge this prevailing presumption. Kire, in *A Respectable Woman*, explores the realities of women's situation in the patriarchal Naga society and vividly describes the miseries endured by Naga women throughout the insurgency. The Naga people follow a set of customary norms that have been formed by their tribal way of life, which is patriarchal. According to these rules, men are required to dominate women and place greater restrictions on them. While men are viewed as important social leaders, Naga women are expected to handle household chores and matters. Kevinuo, the narrator, recounts her mother Khonuo's memories of Nagaland's dreadful colonial and post-colonial past. The story is told through the perspectives of the female narrators, who highlight the way that Naga women are treated by the community based on their gender, with a variety of intersecting factors driving them to the margins and keeping them silent in the social, cultural, and economic spheres. Their hardships throughout the conflict are often ignored. The novel starts with Kevinuo saying, *"It took my mother, Khonuo, nearly forty years before she could bring herself to talk about the war."* (Kire 3).

The prolonged quiet about war is a representation of the victim's psyche's hidden condition when it comes to remembering and talking about the terrible past. The double oppression of Naga women was made possible by the political unrest in Nagaland determined by their gender and race. Khonuo's war narratives serve as an excellent example of how horrible, lethal, and isolated most of the women's encounters were during the fights. In

times of war and conflict, women are usually victimized by acts of abuse based on gender, including rape. As Khonuo states, *"We heard that women were raped in these villages"* (Kire 58)

It demonstrates how Naga women were treated like objects of desire by both the outside world and rebels within their group, who constantly used physical torture as a means of imposing their dominance. In addition, the majority of sexual assaults occurred in front of the victims' families, and the victims were typically slain. Those who wanted to assert their power over Naga women during the war and rebellion believed that they were the weakest weaponry. Because of their fragility in this situation, Naga women were powerless to stop the atrocities committed against them. Therefore, K. B. Veio Pou rightly 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" (Pou 189).

The horrific events that cause gender-based violence against Naga women traumatize their psyches and leave them with lifelong scars, in addition to damaging their physical appearance. In various circumstances, the socially constructed gender notion establishes and distinguishes between the powerful and the weak in society. When there are disagreements in Nagaland, women are always the ones who make up the less strong area. Additionally, Naga women are frequently the targets of physical or sexual abuse inflicted by men from both their group and other cultures, which portrays them as weak and hinders the development of their unique identities.

Societal upheaval

A Respectable Woman, by Easterine Kire, is a story that effectively depicts the deep changes that have molded Naga society, especially when viewed through the prism of important historical occurrences like the Battle of Kohima. This crucial 1944 World War II combat serves as more than just a setting for the story; it also serves as a spark for profound cultural shifts, particularly in the area of gender relations.

In Nagaland, it was clear that there had been significant social and political changes. Through their written documentation, Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Spivak, Virginia Woolf, and other feminist thinkers elevated the concept of the rights of women and helped them realize that women play a supporting function in society while men take on the dominant role and rule it.

The issues and consciousness of women are brought to light by these Western feminist philosophers. Feminist writers and theorists in India work toward gender equality, which includes battling for parity in the workplace, in politics, and in the fields of health and education. Additionally, they have drawn attention to how Indian society's patriarchy suffocates women and compels them to fit in.

Kire examines the evolving responsibilities of women in Naga society in *A Respectable Woman*, drawing on the historical background of the Battle of Kohima. Many Naga communities were compelled to reevaluate long-held beliefs and practices as a result of the war's devastation. Kire, for instance, demonstrates how gender roles had to be reconfigured as a result of the absence of men, who were either fighting or died in the war. Women, who had previously been confined mostly to household roles, were forced to assume roles that had historically been assigned to men. Kevinuo, whose experiences mirror larger cultural shifts, is a perfect example of this transition. She is described in the book as a revolutionary Naga lady who fights for her community women's equal socio-political and cultural rights. She challenges the long-standing patriarchal Naga cultural structure that views women as nothing more than objects. This is demonstrated through the life narrative of the narrator's acquaintance Beinuo, whose husband Meselhou, who is fixated on the strict Naga customs, destroys her life even though he was the one who *"pestered her (Beinuo) to marry him and did not give up until she said yes."* (Kire 148). This is a result of Nagaland's prevailing patriarchal social and cultural structures, which support men's discriminatory treatment of women. In the instance of Meselhou, he finds Beinuo, his perfect victim who submits to the dominance without protest. Meselhou, who pushes her to have a male kid as the heir to his family, is a prime example of male authoritarianism in action. *"He is not happy that the baby is a girl,"* (Kire 123) Beinuo said after giving birth to her daughter Uvi. Because Beinuo is a conventional Naga woman who submits to her culture and does not resist

the wrongs her spouse has done to her, Meselhou's attitude serves as a stark reminder of the gender disparity that exists in Naga culture.

The inability to challenge gender inequity in Naga society is a reflection of one's willingness to submit to men's subjugation. The Naga community has created the belief that a woman can only get social respect if she marries and fulfills the requirements of the system of tribal customs. The pain she must go through to carry out her responsibilities is never noticed by society. This is an indication of the ethnic community's traditional oppression of women, who are left to suffer at the hands of their males regardless of their social obligations. Beinuo stops Kevinuo when she tries to mediate the internal conflicts between Meselhou and Beinuo saying, *"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."* (Kire 123).

Considering that she concludes her statement with "she is a married woman now" shows that she must bear all of the pain and suffering in silence and without complaining. As a result, marriage becomes one of the main avenues via which men from traditional societies can pressure their friends to put up with unbearable prejudice based on gender. Furthermore, some restrictions discourage Naga women from questioning social injustices.

Cultural blending

While women's status has been improving in mainland India, if we focus on the women in Northeast India, we can see that they are still battling for their freedoms and are not allowed to voice their opinions. Nagaland is home to numerous tribes, each with its distinct dialect. Issues like underage marriage and the dowry system are not part of the Naga tribe's culture. The Naga women are more independent and powerful than the women of mainland India since they do not face these social issues. However, it becomes evident that Naga women are marginalized as one delves deeper into Naga society. They are excluded from both the social hierarchy and the political arena as well. In the book, Kire gives readers a realistic portrayal of Naga society and the ways in which Nagaland's patriarchal system is upheld, including through customs, inheritance, and legislation. She provides different home instances that are simple to comprehend and relate to. She was shocked to learn that women and men both support and even celebrate the patriarchal system in society as normal.

Kire deftly draws attention to the people of Nagaland's passionate attempts to lead regular lives in spite of difficult circumstances. Reviving the educational system is a significant step in this direction. There are more dropouts, particularly when it comes to female kids when the schools gradually reopen following the Kohima War. Zeu, Khonuo's older sister, feels too old to return to school at the age of fifteen. Her father enrolls her in a Shillong nursing program and she completes her studies and becomes a qualified midwife after a year. Kire portrays a society that is progressively becoming more accepting of the idea of the professional woman. As a result, Zeu serves as a senior midwife at the civil hospital, and in 1952, Khrielieu Kire becomes the *'first Naga lady doctor'* (Kire 45). In the tale of Khonuo sheds light on a community that respects individuality and equal access to learning for all people, irrespective of gender. Khonuo finishes her formal education and enrolls in a school as a new instructor in anticipation of regularization after working as a history teacher for a while.

She enjoys going shopping with her colleagues, getting meat for the family, and using her first pay check to buy a radio set so she can remain informed about what's going on in the world outside the Naga Hills. People's attitudes alter noticeably when education becomes more widespread, notably ladies. Kevinuo can tell which of the women in her parents' wedding book attended school and which did not. While the less well-groomed ladies made up a serious, unnoticeable presence at the back, the educated women were at the forefront, dressed elegantly in gowns and skirts and posing tastefully with the bride. Education is thereby demonstrated to be a self-confidence enhancer that changes one's sense of self, especially for domestic women in patriarchal societies. The progressive maturation of Kevinuo is accompanied by worries and fears since she is being raised to be a respectable woman. Zeu stands up against such a weak, unfair convention and tells Kevinuo, *"Kevinuo, if you should ever marry such a man, remember that you are not his property for him to beat you and break your bones...A man's responsibility is first and foremost, to provide food and shelter for his family. Then he should teach his children to be good citizens and try to be an example himself. In turn, his family members should respect and honour him. This is the way it is supposed to be. If people start beating each other, don't ever accept that as normal."* (Kire 103-104)

These remarks strengthen Kevinuo's resolve to skip idealizing marriage in favor of focusing on her education and job goals. She shows herself to be a strong person who resists every pressure from her family to follow the path less traveled.

"There is a time for everything. In a person's life, there is a time to marry. It is good to marry when the time is right for it." (Kire 94) In the novel, Kevinuo is first shown as a submissive, humble, and obedient Angami girl; yet, as the story progresses, her development into a more mature individual is evident.

Following her graduation, she began working as a teacher in Kohima. Having seen the conditions of married women around her, she detested the system of marriage and yearned to be single. According to Kire, marriage is like a chain around a woman, suffocating her of her autonomy, joy, beliefs, and aspirations. Through the novel's protagonist, Kire presents the idea of an Angami lady who defies conventional gender stereotypes. She takes up Uvi, the daughter of a friend, and demonstrates how a woman can raise a child successfully without being married. The novel is an illustration of how knowledge gives women the confidence to stand by their convictions and form their own opinions. Kire depicts women rejecting conventional preconceptions and advancing toward a more promising future. Kevinuo who is educated and employed serves as an example of the path to femininity. This is the fully realized, self-reliant, sophisticated lady of today.

Conclusion

Lastly, *A Respectable Woman* by Easterine Kire offers a thorough examination of the long-lasting effects of colonialism on the Nagaland indigenous people, paying particular attention to issues of dehumanization, social unrest, and cultural fusion. This study's careful literary analysis has brought to light how Kire depicts the dehumanizing consequences of colonial subjugation, which robbed people of their humanity and sense of cultural identity. Through the disintegration of conventional social structures, the novel vividly portrays the social instability brought about by colonial control. Furthermore, the story deftly incorporates the concept of cultural blending, which showcases the challenging task of navigating identities and cultural allegiances within a postcolonial framework. This study highlights the agency and resiliency of underrepresented voices, especially Naga women, by utilizing postcolonial and feminist theoretical frameworks and deepens our comprehension of Kire's *A Respectable Woman*.

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